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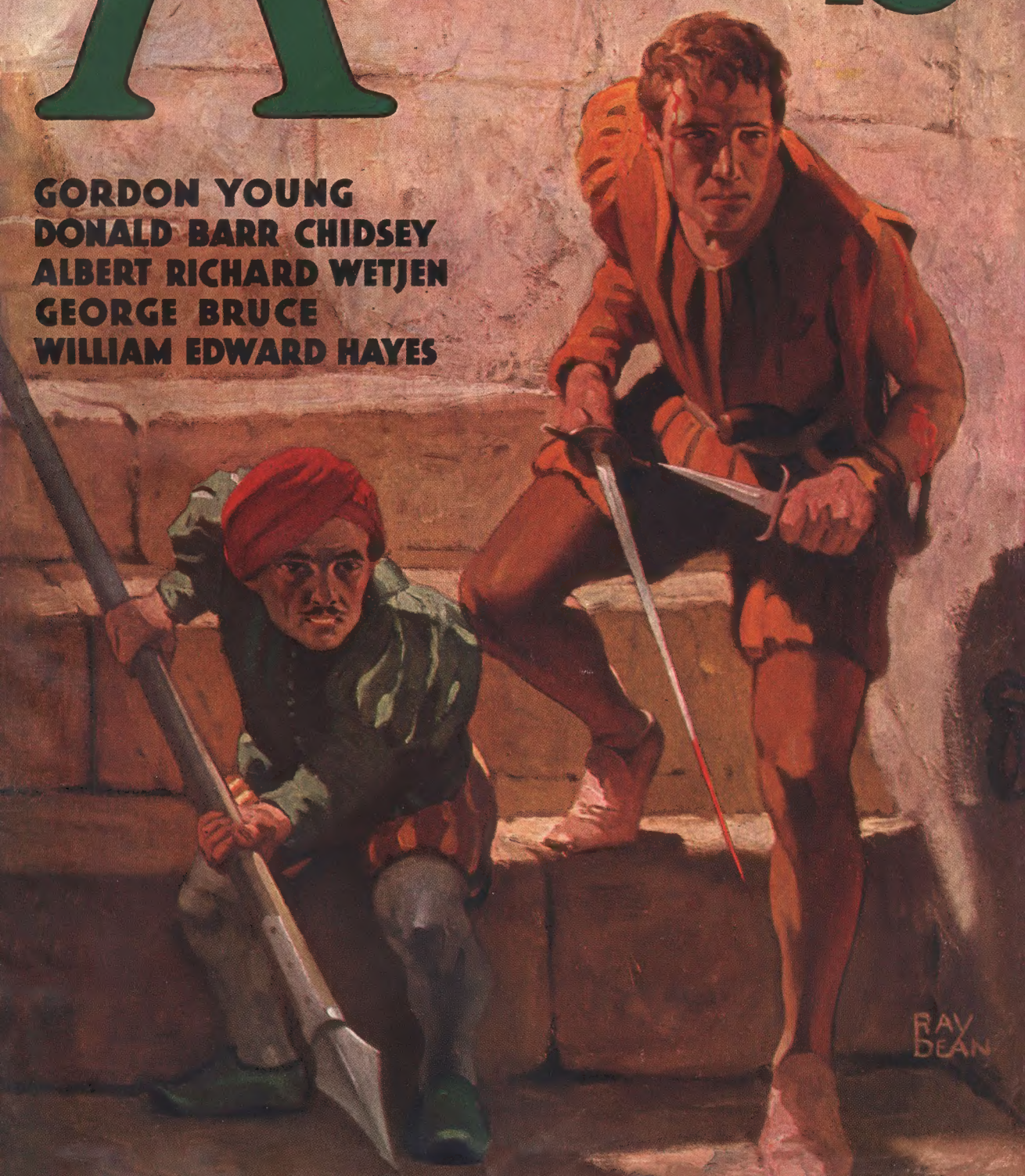

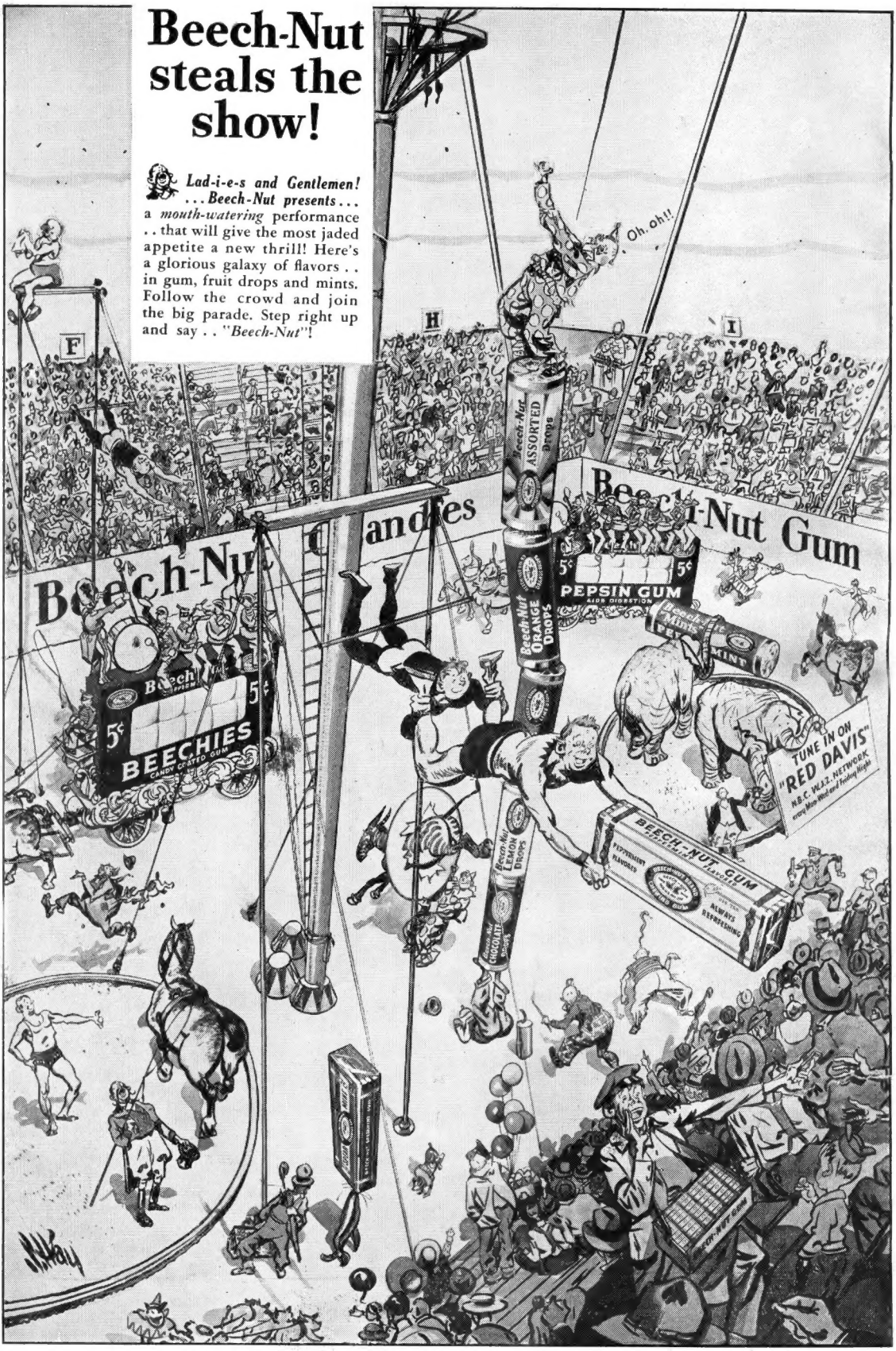
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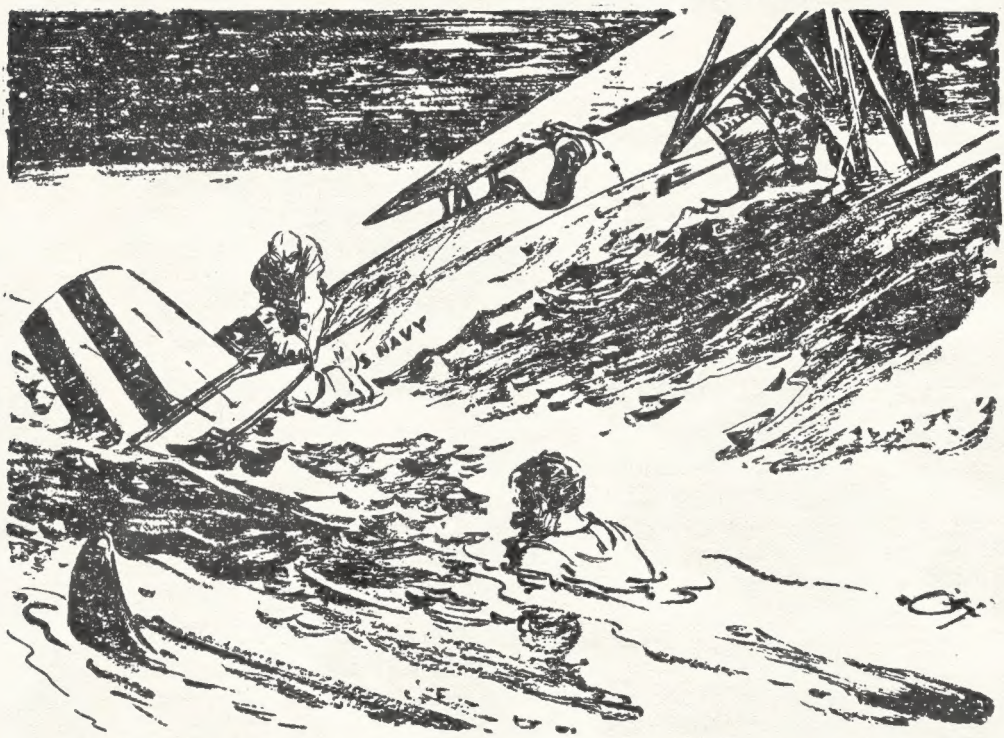
Cover design by Ray Dean *Headings by O'Keefe, Pyles, Hazelton*

Howard V. L. Bloomfield, Editor

Published twice a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as Second Class Matter, August 21, 1934, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Yearly subscription $3.00 in advance. Single copy, 15 cents. Foreign postage, $2.00 additional. Trade Mark Registered; Copyright, 1934, by Popular Publications, Inc.



BLOW ALL TANKS!

NO LANDSMAN may enjoy such a spectacle.

Except for the glimmering of far distant stars the darkness of the night was unbroken, and so thick it seemed to have substance. Its scope was infinite. It filled all of the universe—the sea, the air and the sky.

Darkness, scented with the breath of the tropics.

Silence too, so complete it seemed that every living thing in the world had passed into slumber. The swish of water, cut by the prow of the *Saratoga*, merely accentuated the silence, and the throb of her turbines and motors emphasized the apparent suspension of animated existence.

The battle fleet, running without lights, cruised through the night.

But the night had swallowed the great ships of the fleet, had thrown the mantle of invisibility about the mighty silhouettes of steel. The battle fleet was going to battle. It was operating under war conditions. Under war conditions the tiniest illumination might betray the presence of the fleet to an alert enemy, might bring sudden disaster and defeat.

Somewhere far ahead, lost in the blackness, the flagship *Pennsylvania* was leading the line of battleships. After her steamed the *California, New Mexico, Tennessee, West Virginia, Colorado, Maryland, Mississippi, Texas, New York* and *Arizona*. They constituted the first line offensive of the Red Fleet. The war game centered about the destruction of the Panama Canal.

There was nothing to mark the fact that monsters, each displacing thirty-three thousand tons of Pacific brine,

A Novelette by GEORGE BRUCE

maneuvered in the darkness. But they were there, spaced five hundred yards apart from stern to prow. Throughout hour after hour they had held that formation.

There were officers on the bridges of those ships with faces gaunt from the strain of maintaining position. Officers with tightly set mouths and with eyes aching from peering ahead, sighting at an eerie blue reflection upon the water which came from the stern light fixed to the stern post of the ship ahead and which could be seen only from dead astern, and then only by trained eyes knowing exactly what to look for.

There were times when that tiny position-light on the ship ahead dissolved into the phosphorescent wake upon the surface of the sea, and when for minutes at a time the senior officer on the bridge of the ship following stood with his heart laboring slowly, his throat dry and his nerves taut, hand on the engine room telegraph—waiting for a tremendous shape to loom out of the darkness ahead —and then swift, thunderous collision.

Somewhere in the darkness the flag cruiser *Raleigh* with her brood of racing destroyers about her was tearing along at full speed, combing the seas for a trace of the "enemy." She might have been a proud mother bloodhound teaching her litter how to follow a scent.

The *Marblehead, Memphis, Concord, Richmond, Milwaukee* and *Omaha* of the light cruiser scouting force were far ahead of the line of battleships, forming a screen behind which the Fleet maneuvered.

The heavy cruiser squadron, with the *Chicago* as the flagship, formed an in-

ner screen. The heavy cruisers were sinister shadows even in the light of day, able to deliver terrific blows with the speed of lightning and then to swerve and race away before retaliation could be co-ordinated. In the night they were unseen terrors. They had visible existence only in the greenish-silver of the phosphorus turned up as racing prows parted the water.

Six hundred thousand tons of steel and guns moving soundlessly, unerringly, through the night, and without a light showing! Within those six hundred thousand tons of hulls the energy and power of more than two and a half million man-created horses! Aboard those sea dogs thirty thousand officers and men whetted to a razor edge of physical fitness and trained to be collectively and individually the quintessence of fighting perfection. Each man trained to do a certain task better than any other man in the world could perform a like task.

All of them—ships, engines, guns and men—co-ordinated to make a perfect machine. All of them smashing through the sea in the heavy darknes of early morning.

The position was latitude 07-26N, longitude 88-20W.

Somewhere, far off the port quarter, were the mystic, steaming lands of Central America, Honduras, Costa Rica, San Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala. There were marines aboard the armada who sniffed at the soft breeze blowing from the land and recaptured memories of those places. There were graves along that coast in which squad-mates were sleeping the long sleep.

Memories came of flat roof tops and narrow old world streets; the lace mantillas of *señoritas;* the swagger of third-rate matadors in the national bull rings; the browsing gait of burros. The sensuous breath off-shore worked strange magic among the men aboard the fleet who knew those lands.

Dead ahead, but far distant, would be Cocos Island, a dot in the vast expanse of water. And a little to starboard and much farther away the Galapagos, where the turtles lived forever and grew to enormous sizes and came ashore in the mating season to bury eggs in the sand.

The *Saratoga,* in spite of the darkness which surrounded her, was a bee-hive of activity. Her flight deck was crowded with planes made fast to the eye-bolts. Her great bulk drove easily through the black water. The battlewagons of the fleet were running with everything steaming, but the *Saratoga* loafed along under the wraps. Only two of her great turbines were steaming. Using a third of her power she might have raced away from everything in the fleet excepting perhaps the very fastest of the cruisers.

In the darkness, hands which seemed detached from living bodies reached up into the vitals of the planes on deck and made examinations and adjustments. Fuel hoses were strewn over the deck. Shadows brushed shoulders, crawled between propellers and wings, each of the shadows carrying out a fixed task. No conversation, no interruption in the smooth flow of the work.

The soft wind made little moaning sounds as it caressed wires or piled up against fuselages. After a while the little moaning sounds became scores of cellos and violins with strings touched by as many bows—the tuning of a symphony orchestra with a tremendous string section.

HIGH above the flight deck the *Saratoga's* rear admiral paced the length of her bridge in company with the *Saratoga's* skipper and executive officer. There was a carefully shielded light burning over the navigator's charts—a light which could not be made out at more than five paces. There was a faint glow from the binnacle.

The admiral said:

"I have a hunch. I don't like this at

all! I don't feel right. It's too quiet. It's too easy. It's like waiting in the middle of a dead calm for a tornado to strike. You can't tell me those people are asleep. I know Admiral Dale. He's crafty. He has something up his sleeve. It's going to be unpleasant when he shakes that sleeve in our direction."

The skipper said:

"We made a very careful reconnaissance at sunset. It was completely negative."

The admiral would not be comforted.

"Whenever they give Admiral Dale the Navy end of a defensive problem he fairly chortles. You remember what he did to us at the San Francisco games? It was quiet, like this. He had his planes based at Crissy Field and Mines Field. We never saw or heard a motor. We thought we had him when we turned our planes loose to tear those bases apart.

"And we discovered that he had moved his combat and bombing groups up the valley to a secret field and had left a couple of dummies standing on the line at the bases to fool us. And when we luanched the ships from the carriers and they were well on the way, he turned loose those hidden bombers, flew out over the sea—and bombed hell out of us.

"We lost those maneuvers because Dale and the Blue Fleet outsmarted us. He sank both carriers and left our planes in the air with no place to go but the land and capture. He hasn't forgotten that. He has had one good laugh at our expense. Well, mark my words, gentlemen, Admiral Dale and General Forte are sitting at this minute in General Forte's quarters ashore with smug little smiles, all ready to spring another surprise package."

"We learned a lot from the San Francisco maneuvers, sir," reminded the skipper. "This time we're going about it differently."

The admiral grunted.

"You're a confirmed optimist, Thomas. You known damned well that sea-power alone cannot successfully handle a strong shore position."

"Four bells, sir." It was the officer of the watch reporting.

The navigator popped out of the chart room.

"Here is where we shove off, sir," he informed the skipper. "Our course until 0426 is 193 degrees."

"Very well, Hardy, make it 193 degrees."

The navigator gave the order to the helmsman. The *Saratoga* swung out of her position with the fleet, veered a trifle to the west. After ten minutes she was alone.

"The staff places too much dependence upon carrier tactics," complained the admiral. "Hell, they must think we're magicians."

The skipper smiled.

"This time I think we have the Blues, sir. Naturally the defending cruisers will make an attempt to contact the Red Fleet. But they are far more interested in the *Saratoga* and the *Lexington* than in our battleships and cruisers. They know hell will pop if we can get our planes over their defensive positions. They will concentrate upon locating the carriers and trying to put them out of commission. Once they accomplish that objective they can stand at parade rest and beat off the rest of the Red Fleet.

"But I think we're going to fool 'em. We stay seven hundred miles from land until tomorrow night. The fleet goes in shore and opens the battle. No one knows the *Saratoga's* position. Under cover of darkness tomorrow night, we drive for shore with the carrier's tremendous speed eating up the water. While we are still three hundred miles at sea we launch the planes. They can't find a defense against such a blow. I think it will work."

The admiral shrugged.

"I don't feel right," he insisted.

"Whenever I get those little prickles down my spine something is going to happen."

THE ready room was lined with pilots. They sat on the benches which ran around the room and rested their shoulders against the wall. Eyes were fixed on a blackboard attached to the after end of the room and before which the flight officer was standing, mapping diagrams.

"You understand your jobs?" he demanded of those hundred pairs of eyes in the room. "The fighting groups all go together on this assignment. The usual order holding one fighting squadron for the defense of the carrier will be abandoned in order to give us more striking power over the land. The attack groups will follow, and then the bombers.

"The fighting groups will go in very low and very fast—as low as possible. If the defense has anything flying when you get ashore we'll bracket 'em between our fighters and the Grummans—the two-seaters. The two-seaters will go in at ten thousand feet and dive down to five thousand. The bombers will time the moment of attack so as to arrive ten minutes after the fighters and attack groups are in action over the Canal. Is that clear?"

There was a chorus of nods.

"The shove-off positions are on the ouija board," informed the flight officer. "You might have a look at it as you go out. I don't want you stumbling around at the last minute."

The men in the room stood erect and stretched themselves. They flocked to the forward end of the ready room. They clustered about the "ouija board." The ouija board was a scale replica of the flight deck of the *Saratoga*. It was covered with replicas, to exact scale, of every airplane aboard the carrier. By moving the little ships around on the ouija board it was possible for the flight officer to know instantly how many ships could be put into so much space without the confusion and labor and difficulty of moving the airplanes themselves about on deck to solve the same problem.

The flight officer left the ready room. The pilots relaxed. Chug Johnson rubbed his flattened nose and grinned. His blond hair was tousled. His blue eyes were eager.

"Boy!" he exulted. "It won't be long now. Panama! And do I love Panama? Listen, the last time I was in Colon they had a gang of girls down there from New York, and a regular cabaret. Did we have the time!"

"Girls?" asked Buzz Martin blankly. "You mean—you actually talked to girls?"

Johnson's head bobbed vigorously. "You're damned tootin'—girls. And what I mean, gorgeous, beautiful, glorious girls! Why, one of those babies let me in on a secret. She was hiding out. The Follies wanted her, but they wouldn't give her the dough she wanted—so she just ran out on 'em!"

"I can't believe it," said Martin dubiously. "Looking at you, my man, I am reminded of the yarn of the old lady who was visiting the zoo and stopped for an hour in front of the cage of a very large and very ugly hippo. She simply stared the hippo into a state of hysterics. A keeper came by. A keeper is supposed to know everything. The old lady grabbed his arm.

" 'Oh, keeper!' she pipes. 'Can you tell me—is that a male or a female hippopotamus?'

"The keeper gulped. His reputation was at stake. The hippo in the cage was an absolute stranger to him. So he gave the old lady a distant look.

" 'Madam,' he told her severely. 'That is a question which would only interest or be important to another hippopotamus.' "

"So what?" demanded Johnson belligerently.

"So I can't understand how Chug Johnson coming ashore is going to be important to anyone in Panama but another hippo—"

Johnson's steel corded arms reached for Martin's body. The gang in the ready room were grinning. The wrestling matches between Martin and Johnson were always good—brains against brawn. Johnson's arms tightened about Martin's ribs. There came the crackle of bones and a grunt from Martin.

"Another hippo, huh?" demanded Chug.

The staccato voice of the annunciator sounded in the ready room. Martin and Johnson broke apart with a jerk.

"Lieutenant M a r t i n — Lieutenant Martin—report to the flight officer. Lieutenant Martin—report to the flight officer—on the bridge."

Johnson's arms dropped to his sides. There was a look of mock disgust on his face but there was also a worried look in his eyes. A queer silence fell over the men in the ready room. They were all looking at Martin's face.

"On the bridge!" echoed Johnson. "What in the hell is Jumpin' Joe Peters doing on the bridge?"

"You had it framed, you flat-faced gorilla," charged Martin as he smoothed his rumpled uniform. "I'd have had you on your back in another minute. You got the flight officer to save you."

"Any old time," scoffed Chug. But the worried look did not leave his eyes, and the eyes did not leave Martin's face.

All of them in the ready room knew that when a pilot was summoned to the bridge it meant one thing. Trouble.

"Well, I hope it's nothing pleasant," remarked Johnson.

Martin lifted an eloquent thumb to the tip of his nose.

"Stick around until I get the admiral straightened out," he told the group. "I'll be right back."

He hurried out through the door to the flight deck.

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER PETERS, the *Saratoga's* flight officer, was in the center of a group of officers on the carrier's darkened bridge. The admiral was standing at Peter's shoulder. Martin came to rigid attention and saluted with a snap.

The admiral was first to speak. There was a dubious note in his voice.

"Martin, the flight officer has been telling me that you are his best avigator —if that's the word for aerial navigator. He tells me you have eyes like a cat, the instincts of a homing pigeon and the luck of the damned. Is that true?"

Buzz Martin swallowed. There was a little chuckle from the officers surrounding the admiral.

"I don't know, sir," answered Martin.

There was a silence for a moment.

"Martin," continued the admiral, "did you ever ache to get even with some one who has outsmarted you?"

"Er—yes, sir."

"And what did you do about it?"

"Well, sir, I just kept my eyes open and waited for a chance."

"Precisely!" The admiral nodded vigorously. "You also made very sure that the same party did not have an opportunity to outsmart you a second time?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Martin.

The admiral paced two or three strides along the bridge.

"Were you aboard during the San Francisco maneuvers, Martin?"

There was a sudden eagerness in Buzz's voice.

"Yes, *sir!*"

"And you shared in the indignity heaped upon us all at that time? You were one of the flight leaders who went chasing after a few wrecks of airplanes left on Crissy and Mines Fields as a bait for our planes? And you returned to your base on the *Saratoga* after carrying out your mission to discover the

carrier had been sunk, and theoretically you were out in the middle of the ocean —out of fuel—and—"

"Yes, sir."

"We took an awful beating from Admiral Dale in those maneuvers, didn't we?" The admiral's voice was shadowed with sadness and very provocative. "Dale crowed for weeks about the shellacking he gave us. The whole Navy laughed at us. . . ."

More silence.

"You know that Admiral Dale is commanding the Blue Forces defending the Canal against us in this problem, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"He's probably getting ready to laugh at us again."

The admiral suddenly stopped.

"Martin," he continued pensively, "you may never be an admiral. Hence you may never know how I feel at this minute. But you can understand that Admiral Dale must not be allowed to crow over the *Saratoga* again, can't you? Well, I have a hunch that something is wrong. I'd like to have you do something about that hunch. Things are too peaceful—too quiet. It may all be in order, but still—I have prickles down my spine, Martin—and when an admiral gets prickles down his spine, it's an excellent time to ring for full speed astern on all engines."

There were quiet smiles on the faces of the officers on the bridge. There was not an officer on the *Saratoga* who would not have dived overboard in the middle of the Pacific for the *Saratoga's* admiral. He was a Naval officer, but he was also a human being.

Martin stood at rigid attention. It is not seemly for a mere lieutenant to share in the humor surrounding the admiral and his staff.

"The flight officer tells me that your best specialty is night flying, Martin. How would you like to do a little night flying?"

Martin swallowed hard again.

"It would be quite all right, sir," he told the admiral.

"Do you think you could make out anything suspicious looking in the vicinity of the *Saratoga* from the air—in this darkness?"

"I could spot a ship in a minute, sir," assured Martin. "From above, on a black sea like this, a wake stands out sharply. Then, if they made a mistake in the engine room, and there was just the smallest flare from a stack, I'd spot it. Any one of a dozen things like that are visible when you look down from above in complete darkness."

"You understand? You're volunteering for this job?"

Buzz gathered himself. That was a hell of a swell way to rope a fellow into such a spot! Give him a build up and a sales talk—and then tell him he had volunteered! In spite of himself a little grin broke around the corners of his mouth. There was a liquid affection bubbling within him for this fine faced old officer with the admiral's braid on his sleeves who was looking at him so quizzically. In spite of the half-humorous tenor of his speech this old officer was the big chief. It was in his voice and in his carriage.

"Very good, lieutenant," he told Martin. "The flight officer will give you instructions. Nice flying!"

Martin saluted and did a snappy right about, headed below. The admiral's voice halted him.

"Oh, by the way—Martin. You may be interested to know that you're going to get the Navy Cross for that BW10 business. . . ."

Martin found himself on the flying deck. He did not feel it beneath his feet. He was walking on air.

There was the shrill note of a boatswain's pipe over the annunciator and then the strident call of a trumpet blowing "flight quarters." In an instant, in the darkness, the flight deck was

swarming. Men came rushing up from below, took stations, flitted about in the manner of wraiths moving over familiar ground. Here and there the starlight revealed shifting blobs of color. The yellow helmets and sweaters of the taxi crew; the green helmets of the arrestor-gear crew. Red helmets on the firemen. Blue helmets on the repairmen. Crew chiefs in white.

"Hot Papa" was there, too. Waddling in his ghostly asbestos suit, pulling his weird looking asbestos helmet over his head as he moved to his station. Hot Papa, who never had anything to do but wait for a plane to burn on deck with its pilot in the bonfire, and save the pilot—and the carrier.

The flight officer's voice spoke to the pilots:

"None of you are needed but Martin. Special assignment. All others dismissed."

The pilots, half insulted, flattened themselves in a row against the steel sides of the "island," that part of the carrier's superstructure which abutted into the area of the flying deck.

THE forward section of the flight deck was crowded with single seaters. There was the whine of a starter and then the sharp staccato of a motor firing. The racket increased as the mechanic in the cockpit of Martin's plane ran up the motor and warmed it.

Peters stood at Martin's elbow as Martin donned his leather coat and helmet and goggles.

"No particular instructions, Buzz," he told Martin. "Strictly the Old Man's idea. Shove off, cruise around, keep your eyes open. You can imagine, if anything *does* happen while you're up there and you miss it, we'll all get scalped—and you first. Maybe the Old Man's hunch is sound. He's rabid about the job Admiral Dale did on us at San Francisco. He'll never forgive us for failing to locate those hideouts Dale established to fool us. We're steaming at twenty-five knots. Our course until 0426 is 193 degrees. At 0426 we change to 20 knots and a dead line of 180 degrees.

"Just one thing." A little note of grimness entered Peter's voice. "If you get in trouble you're on your own. You are not to use radio to communicate with the carrier under any circumstances, and a flare is out of the question. If you're forced down and can't make the carrier under normal conditions—you'll just have to sit tight for the next thirty hours."

Martin nodded.

"Yes, sir." He looked overhead at the darkness and at the distant stars.

He passed along the line of pilots strung out the length of the island. Chug Johnson detached himself from the group and squirmed between the wings and propellers with him.

"Gold brick!" gibed Johnson out of the side of his mouth. "Teacher's pet! Admiral's dog-robber!"

"Nuts!" answered Martin pleasantly.

He settled himself in the cockpit of his Boeing and adjusted the 'chute harness. He closed the buckle of his safety belt and felt for the throttle. His hand still ached from Johnson's grip. He looked ahead and drew a sharp breath.

The bow of the carrier was like an indistinct horizon rising up dead in his face. A short jump—and over the bow—with the ocean under him—and nothing else. Cripes! They gave a guy less and less space to get off in. Just because there were a lot of ships on deck they expected the Boeing to become a flying windmill for the occasion.

He heard Peter's voice over the idling thump of his engine.

"O. K.?" asked Peters.

"Let 'er rip!" grinned Martin.

"See you later, then." Peters gave the launching signal.

Martin opened the throttle wide. The powerful motor in the Boeing whipped

itself into a frenzy. A slip stream like a tornado roared out from under its tail and smashed savagely at the secured ships on the deck. They writhed and struggled to be free.

The tail of the Boeing blasted high off the deck. Then it was rolling, with the bow of the carrier coming on with agonizing rapidity. A fifty-foot drop to the ocean if it did not have flying speed when it went over that bow. Down with a smack! Right in front of the knife-like prow of the carrier. No power on earth to keep the carrier from running it down.

Martin's body went cold. His eyes stared straight to the front. The Boeing leaped ahead as if catapulted. He eased the stick back. Then the deck was out from under him. He felt the Boeing settle. He pushed the stick forward a little. The motor sobbed. Spray splashed in his face. He picked up the single seater with gentle pressure against the controls. He knew that the wheels had brushed the water.

Then the Boeing was climbing.

He discovered that his jaws were aching from the force with which he had clamped them together. He sucked in a great breath. The Boeing plunged ahead into the darkness. No horizon. No guide. Merely the stars and the blackness.

At five thousand feet he eased the rate of climb and circled. He looked for the carrier. He saw a faint streak of greenish flame against the black surface of the sea. So faint and so distant it seemed to have no actual existence. But it was the carrier, or rather the wake of the carrier. The carrier herself was invisible.

He carried the Boeing around in ever widening circles. He peered down through the darkness. The black void below his wings was completely undisturbed. After a while the darkness played tricks with his vision and imagination. Twice he went storming for the surface of the sea with a breath taking rush, to investigate red flashes in the black void—only to discover that the red flashes did not exist and that the sea was empty.

After half an hour he settled back in his seat and fought the monotony of the assignment and the almost hypnotic urge to sleep. He kept himself awake by checking his position and speed and by calculating the position of the carrier.

HE WAS alone in the midst of a black infinity. Now and then a little prickle passed over him—the instinctive chill which comes to all men who are abandoned by their fellows and who are oppressed with the knowledge of complete isolation. Now and then he sang to himself, shouting into the force of the slip stream and the drone of the motor. He sang "Anchors Aweigh" and all of the Academy songs. He sang the Marine Corps anthem.

He stopped because his throat was parched and dry. He felt a terrific desire to use the radio. Not because he needed the radio, but just to assure himself of the presence of other mortals in the universe. Just to listen to a response to his signal and to know that a man's hand had sent that answering impulse winging into space.

At 0426 he made new calculations based on the carrier's change of course.

At 0430 the first dirty gray tinge of dawn touched the horizon to the east. It was a miracle. It was like the first living thing beholding the first sun of the world! The dawn grew from gray to purple, and then to rose. The intensity grew until it pained his eyes. Then the east was a flaming red horizon—a forest fire burning over the edge of the universe. And then the sun! Blinding him—but glorious. It warmed him. The light ran through his body like wine. He found himself singing again.

It was a hell of a swell world. And the admiral was a grand old guy. The *Saratoga* was the best ship on top of

the sea, and flying was a man's racket.

Man, alone, in the heights, thinks crazy thoughts. Buzz Martin was no exception.

The motor in front of his face coughed suddenly like a man who has been shot through the lungs with a Colt .45 automatic. It picked up—hit again—coughed—strangled, fought for breath—faltered—stumbled.

Martin lunged forward in the seat. He choked the motor; used the wobble pump. In a flash he had examined the tank connections; cut in the emergency tank. But the motor still coughed—wheezed, labored.

The Boeing became heavy, loggy. It weaved about, forced Martin to push the stick forward in a glide. He was doing a dozen things at once: looking for the carrier, nursing the motor, searching the sea and cursing, grimly and viciously.

There was a last rattle from the tortured motor. The prop went dead-stick—stopped with a jerk as it bounced against compression. The Boeing wailed—pointed for the ocean.

Martin did the only thing remaining to be done. He opened the valves to inflate the flotation gear. He took the ship down in a slow glide. No reason to maneuver here, to try for a safe landing. No necessity of making a carrier landing on a deck ninety feet wide and a landing space two hundred feet long. Here was the whole Pacific with nothing in sight. The problem was to put the Boeing on the water without tearing the ship apart.

The ocean which had been beautiful and placid when looked at from high above became menacing and boisterous with no motor to keep the Boeing in flight. Waves which had been gentle seemed to grow in gigantic proportions. He could see the spray leaping off the crests. He leveled the Boeing.

The ocean was twenty feet—ten feet—below his wings. He pulled the stick back sharply to keep the plane from striking the water with its wheels at flying speed and nosing over into the sea. The Boeing nosed upward with the last ounce of its buoyancy, stalled in place, pancaked, and smacked flat against the water. A wave washed over its nose. The lower wing disappeared below the surface. The flotation gear exerted its lift and the wing emerged. The Boeing rolled and tossed and pitched with each motion of the water about it.

There was a thump against the tail of the plane. Martin turned, a surge of alarm shooting through his belly. He saw a slate-gray torpedo launch itself through the sea. It circled away from the floating plane, turned and hurled itself at the Boeing's tail. It struck the fuselage with vicious ferocity. It ripped a section of the fabric away.

Martin stared. The slate-gray torpedo was steered by a dorsal fin which slipped through the water with tremendous speed. There was a swirl of spume about the torpedo.

A SHARK! The spume was caused by the lashing of its tail. It struck at the fuselage again and again in a blind rage. After a moment there were other torpedos—other sharks—swarming about the Boeing. They made swishing sounds as they cut through the water.

Martin sat without moving in the little cockpit. There was six inches of water in the cockpit and there was nothing but a sixteenth of an inch of doped fabric between his body and the sea.

Except for the sharks the sea was empty.

The fragile crate upon which he floated bobbed up and down. He stared at the wing struts. At the end of the first hour of floating the struts had gone into the water a matter of three inches. The lazily rolling waves were breaking over the wings and nose of the ship. The weight of the motor was dragging the Boeing down by the nose. The wings

creaked and groaned as the shifting pressure of the water wrenched at them.

He remembered Peter's instructions: "No radio—no flare—under any conditions. If you're forced down you'll have to sit tight for the next thirty hours."

Thirty hours? His brain did dull mathematical acrobatics. Two inches an hour, divided into thirty hours meant —the bottom of the Pacific for one Boeing and one Martin. He'd never see that Navy cross.

His face was blistered from the action of hot sun on salt spray. His throat was paralyzed by thirst.

Once, a shark grounded himself on the half-submerged lower wing, and flipped and fought to be free with such violence that the wing ribs crumpled for a distance of three feet on either side of the shark.

At the end of two hours he threw overboard such unnecessary equipment as parachute, leather coat—anything that would lighten the plane. The Boeing was deeper by the nose. He wondered if he could wade out there and cut loose the motor, some way, to relieve the ship of its dead weight.

The sharks gave him the answer. He could not.

His eyes, festering into slits, suddenly opened. His nostrils dilated. He grabbed at the sides of the cockpit with his hands.

God! This *was* a shark. A monster, rising leisurely to the surface. It was tremendous, bigger than the Boeing! Then he heard himself screaming—yelling—like an insane man—because a periscope had appeared in the middle of the shark, had turned slowly in all directions. And then the contours of a conning tower broke through the waves, and the round, whale-like back of a submarine came awash amid a foaming mass of bubbles. Tons of sea water cascaded from the sleek hull as the sub—the giant shark—lifted above the surface.

Martin sat rigid—staring. His hands still gripped the sides of the cockpit. It just couldn't be. No man was that lucky.

The conning tower hatch of the submarine opened with a clang and figures in dungarees tumbled out on the wet deck. Figures with lines. Figures—waving to him!

One figure wore the white cap of an officer. Excepting for the cap, no one would have suspected his rank. He wore a blue woolen sweater and dungarees like the rest of the men on deck.

The sub maneuvered very carefully. The officer called below through the conning tower. A hand passed him a rifle. He took half a dozen shots at the sharks swimming about the Boeing. There was the thudding of slugs into gray, solid flesh. Crimson stains on the water. The sea was convulsed around the stains. Other slate-gray shapes came hurtling upward, snatching, tearing and rending the wounded.

A line came writhing and coiling from the sub to the Boeing. Martin caught it and made it fast about a strut. The crew of the sub heaved mightily, pulled the waterlogged Boeing closer. So close that he could swing precariously from a wing tip over to the sloping hull of the sub. He went into the water only up to his waist. Strong hands gripped his wrists, pulled him upward onto the cat walk.

He heard a voice, quizzical, but withal a jerky voice, calling his name.

"Great gods and little fishes! Buzz Martin!" Then the voice emphasized a bored drawl. "Well, fawncy seeing *you* here!"

Martin forced his reeling head to stop spinning long enough to focus his eyes on a face. He grinned. A tired, ghastly grin.

"Tommy!" he croaked. "My God! Tommy Bell! And he had to be the guy to fish me out of the middle of the Pacific!"

They hugged one another. Wrestled

about the slippery deck. They pounded one another on the shoulder.

"Come on," growled Bell after the first instant of greeting. "Get below! You've got to get patched up a little."

He gestured behind Martin's back. A husky seaman picked Martin up in his arms and lowered him through the conning tower hatch. Other arms from within the sub took him from the first pair of arms.

The sub's commander shot the sun with his sextant. In all he took three different shots to be sure of the accuracy of the sight. Then he swarmed down the hatch. The hatch clanged shut. There was the throbbing of the sub's engines. She submerged beneath the surface.

MARTIN abandoned himself to the restfulness of the cot under his body. He steeped himself in the luxury of relaxing all of his muscles. Crazy thoughts were whipping through his head. A stiff jolt of brandy from the skipper's locker had sent new life surging through his body.

His thoughts churned and seethed. The Academy! Graduation. The last man in the class marching up to take his diploma from the hands of the Secretary of the Navy. The ironic cheer of the Brigade. Then the ceremony of throwing away the white caps. Space above the graduating class whirling with white head gear—sailing wildly.

And Tommy Bell, who had played end on the varsity for which Buzz Martin had called signals, saying:

"I'm going to submarines. I've applied for sub service. I've got a yen to get into a man's end of the game. I'd rather be a big fish in a little puddle than a little fish in an ocean. Couple of years and I'll be in command of my own boat."

Buzz Martin giving him the horse laugh.

"*Man's* racket. Sailing one of those lousy sardine cans? Living like a salted herring? Stinking with oil? Why, I wouldn't be found dead on a submarine!"

His own words out of a past eternity coming back to sound in his ears. "Found dead on a submarine!" Jeez! The sight of that periscope when it came prying up out of the water! And the white markings of Tommy's boat "V-21" showing on the conning tower. Three hundred feet of steel whale. "What a sight! To a bird sitting in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in a sinking Boeing and completely surrounded by sharks. What a sight!

Tommy Bell came into the compartment and stood looking down at him.

"Figure you'll float or founder?" he inquired. "So you can't take it, heh?"

Martin's eyes were suddenly suspicious.

"Say," he demanded. "Didn't I read that your damned V-21—what is it—the *Cuttlefish* or *Snark* or something—was playing around with the force known as the Blue Fleet, making futile gestures of guarding the Panama Canal against our Red Fleet in which all the sailors worth mentioning are sailing?"

"Sure," grinned Bell. "Submarines in our Navy are largely a defensive arm. Why not?"

"What the hell are you doing out here, then, a couple of hundred miles away from where you're supposed to be?"

Martin's eyes were fixed on Bell's face. It was funny, how a guy like Bell could be a smart looking officer, even in dungarees and a blue sweater, and how you knew he was running the show aboard this sardine can.

"Being an especially well qualified submarine officer—" began Bell with the same grin.

Martin blew up his cheeks and vibrated his tongue, giving vent to a loud, liquid sound known as the Bronx cheer.

"As I was saying—before the vulgarity crept into the conversation—being a crack submarine officer, I have a

roving commission at the moment. I am questing the high seas in search of a hog-barge named the *Saratoga* and laughingly described as an aircraft carrier."

Martin's jaw was suddenly set.

"Oh, yeah? Well, it will be a surprise to you then, to learn that the *Saratoga* is five hundred miles away—just about to blow hell out of your Panama Canal."

A grinning ensign sidled into the compartment.

"Lieutenant Martin, Ensign McGrath," introduced Bell. "McGrath is my right hand man." He grinned at Buzz. Then he turned to McGrath. "If you want to take lessons in how to be a cheerful liar, McGrath, get a load of Martin's line. He just told me that the *Saratoga* is five hundred miles away—about to bust our precious Canal."

McGrath's mouth opened. He hooted with laughter.

"Well, what's so funny about that?" demanded Buzz.

"You," informed Bell. "How come you were out in the middle of the ocean then, five hundred miles away from a flying deck?"

"I got lost."

"Uh-huh! There he goes, McGrath! Were you listening? Doesn't he do it well? I told you he was the ranking liar in the service!"

"What do you care where the *Saratoga* is, anyway?" growled Martin. "You couldn't catch her in a million years."

"For what kind of money?" inquired Bell.

"Anything from a nickel to a million. That's me—Bet-a-Million Martin!"

"You shouldn't bet, my man," reproved Bell. "And never with your superior officer. But to teach you a lesson I'll lay you fifty bucks I take the *Saratoga*."

"Listen," barked Buzz hotly. "The only thing you can take in this tub is pneumonia."

Bell's face took on a most placid expression.

"You see, when I put out on this cruise I figured to myself where would I go if I was running the *Saratoga*, and how I'd take my crack at the Canal defenses. So I'm going there, and I'll bet you another fifty bucks I'm right!"

There was a little pause. Bell's smile was angelic.

"Ah—Mr. McGrath," he said politely. "I think it would be well to secure the prisoner—w'ot?"

"Oh, quite, sir," agreed McGrath. "In fact, quite quite, sir."

"If you will summon the bosun's mate?" suggested Bell.

"With much pleasure, sir," grinned McGrath wickedly.

The boatswain's mate squeezed into the compartment.

"Put the prisoner in irons, bosun," ordered Bell pleasantly. "We simply cannot afford to have the gentleman around under foot—or throwing monkey wrenches into the machinery — damn him. Show him every courtesy, you understand, bosun, but put him in irons. Hands and feet in irons. Hands behind his back. Y'betcha!"

"Yes, sir!" said the boatswain with a grin.

"Put him in what?" shrieked Buzz.

"Irons is the word, my man," repeated Bell. "Irons—small metal bands of very tough material, made especially to fit the wrists and held secure by a ratchet arrangement until released by a key. Both bracelets being joined together by a very rugged chain. In other words—brig jewelry."

Martin heaved himself up from the cot and hit Bell with a cross-body block at the knees. Bell went down with a thud. McGrath lunged onto the heap with a whoop. After a minute McGrath and Bell were sitting on Martin's torso, admonishing him.

The boatswain's mate came back with two sets of handcuffs. He snapped them

about Buzz's wrists and ankles.

Martin cursed hoarsely. It got him nothing but grins. By this time the entire crew of the V-21, with the exception of men standing vital watches, had contrived to pass the compartment for a squint at the "prisoner."

"We honor you, my man," announced Bell, tenderly rubbing elbows and stern which had come into violent contact with the metal deck under the drive of Martin's body. "We know you would think nothing at all of sinking a submarine to save your damned floating garage from the dishonor of being bumped out of the war game by a sardine can."

"You go to hell!" snorted Martin.

"Tut . . . tut!" mourned Bell. "And to men who have practically interposed their bodies between you and a school of very hungry sharks! Did you ever experience such ingratitude, Ensign McGrath?"

Together, still grinning, the two submarine officers left the compartment.

THE V-21 vibrated with the force of the energy driving her. She was hot as a furnace. The stink of lubricating oil was thick. It seemed to drip from the nostrils as one breathed the heavy air. Now and then she came to the surface for a sight, crawling up cautiously, sticking her periscope into the light of day, taking a quick glance at the surrounding sea. For the most part she ran at a depth of sixteen feet. There was an air of expectancy, of thrill, stalking through her. Men talked in low tones, leaped to obey orders.

Bell and McGrath hung over the chart table minutes on end making constant calculations and plotting the course.

For Martin the time passed with agonizing slowness. It became high noon, and then midafternoon. He felt the steel hull of the V-21 grow buoyant again. She was rising—a foot at a time, with great caution. He heard Bell's voice giving incisive orders. The boatswain's mate came into the compartment and unlocked the cuffs on Martin's ankles.

"Lieutenant Bell's orders, sir," he announced. "And would you care to join him in the central operating compartment?"

He watched Martin narrowly and moved at Martin's shoulder as they walked forward.

Bell and McGrath were huddled about the periscope screen. They seemed exultant—wildly elated.

"Ah," said Bell, "our prisoner. You know, McGrath, one time our prisoner made a very nasty crack about the submarine service. He said he wouldn't be found dead on a submarine. It is fitting and proper that he be chastened in spirit and taught the great lesson of humility." There was a grim something in his voice.

He moved away from the periscope screen.

"Take a look," he invited Buzz. "See if you can see anything familiar."

Martin found himself looking at an arrangement of mirrors and ground glass much like the ground glass reflector of a high speed camera. A shock raced over his body. There, in front of him, was a miniature picture of the *Saratoga*—a white bone between her teeth—passing across the screen.

Bell was snapping orders to the helmsman. Orders that kept the image fixed upon the screen.

Martin could even see the Black Cock on the *Saratoga's* stack—could see the planes crowded upon her deck. He groaned. He noticed that Bell's face was suddenly very white, and that McGrath's face was taut with strain. Suddenly he got the idea that this was really war and that this was not a game. He heard Bell's command into the speaking tube.

"Load 1 and 2! Practice heads!"

After a moment a reply came back through the tube. "Nos. 1 and 2 loaded, sir!"

McGrath moved to an instrument panel within the compartment. He stood waiting, his eyes fixed on his skipper's face.

Martin watched in a cold coma. The *Saratoga* was steaming. She was alive —had never seemed so beautiful, so lithe, so proud. There was a hard lump in his throat. He stood straight. He tried to keep his face averted, away from Bell. But Bell was not watching him. Bell's eyes were fixed on the *Saratoga's* image on the periscope screen.

Bell was talking rapidly—like thinking aloud.

"I headed her off. I tried to figure her course, then run at right angles. Well, there she is! Cold turkey. About seven hundred and fifty yards away, and so sure of herself that she hasn't even spotted us yet. The 'scope is only out a foot." He tensed suddenly.

"Stand by to fire!"

"Stand by to fire," repeated McGrath woodenly.

"Fire 1!" barked Bell.

There was a slow recoil from the bow and a little hiss.

"No. 1 has fired, sir," reported McGrath.

One breathless instant of interval, with Bell's head lowered over the screen. Then his voice again:

"Fire 2!"

The same little shock and hiss of air, and McGrath's impersonal voice:

"No. 2 has fired, sir."

Bell pulled Martin's head down to the periscope screen.

"Look!" he ordered tensely.

"Watch! Watch!"

There was a tiny line of bubbles upon the surface of the sea—and something invisible racing at tremendous speed toward the *Saratoga*. Something driving ahead—sinister in spite of invisibility.

There was a choking sentence from Bell.

"She sees them! She's veering!"

Even submerged, and at the distance, they heard the staccato shriek of the *Saratoga's* whistle. Short savage blasts.

The big carrier swung swiftly, but the torpedos were swifter. There was a splash of water against the carrier's side. Something leaped out of the sea and then fell back with a splash. Bell's fingers gouged into the muscles of Martin's forearm.

"A hit!" He shrieked. "A hit—with both! She's gone! We got her!"

Martin stood there. There were tears running down his cheeks.

It was a full moment before Bell could speak.

"I'm sorry as hell, Buzz. But you know how it is. Every man to his racket. Mine's submarines. You're a flying officer."

HE GAVE the order to blow the tanks. The V-21, with her massive three hundred forty-two feet of length and her two thousand tons of weight, rose like a bubble. The conning tower hatch was lifted. The men poured out on deck. They were wild with elation. They danced back and forth over the treacherous footing. They made derisive gestures toward the *Saratoga*. They clung to the chain rail—parasites on the back of a minnow, when the V-21 was compared with the great sweep of the *Saratoga*.

The carrier had lost way. The bone dropped from in front of her prow. She hove to, resting quietly and steadily upon the sea.

Bell spoke to his radio petty officer.

"Lieutenant Bell, commanding U. S. S. V-21, requests the admiral's permission to board the *Saratoga* for the purpose of transfering a prisoner of war."

He did not look at Martin. Somehow

he couldn't bear the look on Martin's face.

After a minute the V-21 maneuvered close to the *Saratoga's* side. A boat put off from the carrier. Together Bell and Martin stepped into the boat. They were conveyed to the ladder—went aboard.

There was a complete silence on the *Saratoga*. The men on her decks were glum looking. There was a start of surprise as they recognized Martin. Only Chug Johnson came rushing up to Buzz, like a St. Bernard puppy.

The admiral was tight-lipped. "Very well done, lieutenant," he complimented Bell. "But was it necessary actually to hit us with two torpedos?"

Bell stood rigidly.

"I'm sorry, sir. But in the last maneuvers I had an easy target, sir, and didn't fire, and the umpire on the target ruled that had I fired I would have missed—" He stopped abruptly.

The admiral cleared his throat gruffly.

"I—er—see you picked up Martin?"

"Yes, sir. Floating on the sea. In pretty bad shape. It was fortunate I came up for a sight, sir."

The telephone bell rang. The voice of the radio C. P. O. came over the wire to the officer of the watch.

"The commander-in-chief directs the *Saratoga* to proceed to port and to withdraw from further participation in the problem."

"Sunk—by God," said the admiral, half to himself. His lips thinned slightly. "I suppose you're one of Admiral Dale's bright young men?" he asked Bell brusquely.

"Yes, sir," admitted Bell.

What the admiral said thereafter was lost in the wind as he turned to walk away.

Bell went over the side and back to the V-21. He went in a complete silence. He went with a grin.

The crowning insult came with the voices of the sub's crew across the water. They were singing at the top of their lungs, for the edification of the *Saratoga*:

"I sail along with decks awash,
All hid by flying spray,
And warily I search the sea
For ships on which to prey.
And none may know just when I come
And none know where I go;
As quick as breath, as sure as death
I send them all below—
Down where the slimy sea snakes creep,
Their evil eyes aglow!"

A submarine song! They sang it with a relish and a whoop. They sustained the "slimy-sea-snake" business — drew it out—long and lustily.

Bell stepped aboard his own command. The hatch closed. The V-21 moved off.

Chug Johnson said disgustedly: "You're a fine palooka! A real hero! Why didn't you wreck that damned thing while you were aboard her? Lettin' her take us like that! I'll bet the Old Man will run you through a wringer!"

"Aw, go to hell," snapped Martin.

He went below. He couldn't face the curious glances of the men on deck, nor the smiles of his fellow pilots.

"Captured by a submarine!" someone had snorted as he brushed by a group of pilots. "A submarine! It's a wonder he wasn't overtaken by a blimp!"

Martin sat in gloomy isolation. He was waiting for anything to happen. For a summons to the bridge. But nothing happened. His solitude was unbroken.

Late in the afternoon Peters visited him for a moment. Peters stood swaying on his feet, his hands rammed into his pockets. He looked at Martin sorrowfully.

"The admiral is fit to be tied," he announced solemnly. "Boy, you sure did a beautiful bit of scouting for the admiral's peace of mind. You not only

found the danger the admiral suspected, but you brought it right home with you. That's performing an assignment right up to the hilt. It's damned few men who can put out over the ocean from a carrier and come back to the ship in the belly of a sub. Genius! That's what it is! Genius!"

"Aw, hell," groaned Martin. "Don't rub it in, Pete. Bell did plenty of that while I was aboard his lousy sardine can."

THE V-21 ran submerged to the base of her conning tower. She cut through the water with a sinister silence. The late afternoon sun glinted upon her steel hide. Her wake boiled and frothed after her, but soundlessly, and the sea parted before her streamlined bow and rolled swiftly over her, until it was broken by her conning tower.

Below, in the central operating compartment, Lieutenant Bell and Ensign McGrath stood watch. There was an atmosphere of jubilation within the V-21. Her men went about with smiling faces. Bell and McGrath chuckled now and then as they worked the boat.

Now and then they broke out into gusts of laughter. There had been no sleep on the submarine for more than thirty hours, but the men were alert. They were bright eyed and seemed flowing with energy. Her motors pulsed and throbbed and she drove forward with a rush.

In Panama there would be liberty. In Panama there would be back-slappings and congratulations—and treats, when the story was told. There would be a chance to crow over the exploit of the V-21 to envious fellow gobs. The story of how the V-21 went to sea under the best damned submarine officer in the service, and sank the *Saratoga* by punching her in the belly with two torpedos. There would be a chance to roar over Lieutenant Bell's answer to the *Saratoga's* admiral:

"I'm sorry, sir. But in the last maneuvers I had an easy target sir, and didn't fire, and the umpire on the target ruled that had I fired I would have missed!"

Cripes! Was that a howl! So Tommy Bell smacked the *Saratoga* with two torpedos just to be sure the umpire wouldn't call him out on strikes. That was Tommy Bell. The best submarine officer in the service. Brains—that was why the V-21 had all the undersea "E's." A guy could go to sea under a skipper like Bell and enjoy submarines. Probably Admiral Dale would come aboard the V-21 to congratulate the skipper and the crew. And that meant liberty!

It came on dark. McGrath worked the boat's position on radio signals from two shore stations. He handed the calculations to Bell. He exploded:

"I can't get it out of my mind! It's probably lousy to laugh at poor Martin, but the look on his mug when he squinted through the 'scope and saw the *Saratoga!* I'll remember it to my dying day. I'd give a month's pay for a picture of his face at that second."

Bell laughed.

"Humility and the proper regard for a man's calling should be a special course at the Academy. What a laugh it gave old Buzz when I told him I was going to submarines because I liked the service. And then to pick him up miles at sea, sitting on what was left of his poor, damned airplane! It's just too much! It only happens in books!"

The V-21's running lights were set. She plunged on through the darkness.

It was five bells. The periscope showed nothing but a wall of blackness. The smell of hot metal and chemically purified air became thick within the hull. The temperature within the sub rose gradually. Men went about with sweat streaming from their faces. But she steamed better with nothing showing

but her conning tower, and officers and crew were anxious for Panama.

The man on watch at the periscope suddenly grew tense.

"Running lights, sir!" he reported. "Off the port bow—close!"

Bell leaped to the periscope. He saw a great shadow. There was an angry green blob of light burning aboard the shadow. Here and there white lights marked the port holes in the shadow. She was close! So close that his heart contracted sharply. She was bearing down on the V-21.

Bell's hand reached for the engine-room telegraph. He pushed the control all the way down. Bells rang in the engine-room for full speed ahead. The V-21 lunged forward.

"Blow all tanks!" Bell's voice was metallic.

Men at stations moved controls, working with the precision and calmness of mechanical figures. There was the sound of air under pressure driving into the tanks. The V-21 surged upward on even keel.

There was a blinding flash of light upon the periscope screen. A searchlight. The steamer had sighted the submarine. A look-out had spotted the conning tower.

The conning tower hatch went up with a bang.

"Fire a flare, McGrath," ordered Bell.

McGrath snatched a Very pistol, he swarmed up on deck through the conning tower. He lifted the pistol. There was a spurt of flame. A red trail of fire arched through the black of the night.

The steamer blew four blasts of her whistle.

A tightness clutched Bell by the throat and a hand clutched at his heart. He ordered full ahead on the port engine and full astern on the starboard. The submarine swung sharply. At the same time his hand swept toward the emergency signals. Collision quarters ran loudly through the metal hull. The watertight compartments closed under the urge of the emergency control. He went up through the conning tower with a rush.

"Take the control compartment," he snarled at McGrath.

The steamer blew four blasts of her whistle a second time and held her course and speed. Bell cursed savagely. The submarine was listing with the drive of her engines. The steamer's whistle hooted again, frantically this time. Her bow seemed to hang above Bell's head. She veered sharply. He could hear bells ringing in the steamer's guts. She veered—right into the V-21.

The prow of the steamer sheared into the sub's stern. There was a crash and the rip of metal plates. And the monster rushed on, driven by her momentum and weight.

Below, McGrath and the men at stations were sprawled over the metal decks. The force of the collision threw Bell down the conning tower hatch. There had been one awful instant when he had snatched at the body of his chief boatswain. The boatswain had gone overboard.

The sub was sinking by the stern. Bell's hands battened down the conning tower hatch. There was no hope of assistance from that lousy steamer. Before she could be hove to and boats put over the side the sea would engulf the V-21 and her men would be dying.

A grimy-faced engineer reported that the port shaft was sheared through and that she was making water rapidly by the stern. There was the smell of salt water within the bowels of the submarine. The men were at collision stations, their eyes were fixed on Bell's face. The faces were marked by a pallor, but they were standing by, awaiting orders.

"All watertight compartments are closed, sir," reported the boatswain's mate. "The stern tanks are filling."

"Try blowing 'em!" ordered Bell.

The pumps churned. They waited, faces grim. The sloping angle of the deck toward the stern did not change. If anything she listed more sharply aft. It was suddenly very hot. The humidity became unbearable. It walled in about the men. It caused them to breathe thick, hot air, like invisible steam. Perspiration ran over them in streams.

"Keep that starboard shaft turning over," snapped Bell. "We may be able to keep enough pressure against her flippers to hold the stern up."

He was watching the depth indicators. The man at the controls caught his glance.

"How deep?" he asked.

"Twenty by the bow, sir. Thirty-two by the stern."

They could feel the submarine churning about in circles, driven by the starboard propeller alone. The rudder would not answer the helm.

Minutes passed. Minutes—like eternities. Men made reports. Made them in casual voices, but in voices holding a brittle note. Men went about duties as they had been trained to perform those duties under conditions of an emergency.

The radio operator, using the oscillater, broadcast a constant S O S.

They heard the thump and grind of the steamer's propellers churning overhead. Then there was a silence. An hour passed. She was down more sharply by the stern. The buoyancy of her uninjured compartments was keeping her from sinking. But she was gradually losing ground in the grim battle to stay afloat.

At five in the morning the monotonous voice of the man at the depths gauges:

"Fifty by the bow, sir. Seventy by the stern."

Bell's mouth was a thin line and his eyes were glittering. He spoke quietly to McGrath.

"We'll have to leave her, McGrath," he said. "We'll have to take chances—while there is still a chance to take."

He ordered the crew into the escape compartment.

The "mechanical lungs" were broken out. The men donned them in turn. Queer things, like gas masks covering the head and shoulders, with breathing tanks held in place by a harness. With the "lungs" the men were like savages adorned with ceremonial head dress for some weird tribal dance. The water tight door shutting them off from the rest of the submarine closed behind them. There was a long, cylindrical trunk in the escape compartment. It was like a torpedo tube standing on end. It communicated directly with the sea.

The compartment flooded with sea water as the hatch at the top of the trunk was opened and permitted the sea to enter. The water arose about the men and submerged them. There was no confusion, no hesitation. One by one they crawled into the cylinder, disappeared—were shot out into the ocean, surrounded by a "bubble" of air to equalize the pressure of the sea against their bodies.

It was weird, ghastly. In the escape compartment the sea swallowed each man in turn. Bubbles exhaled from the "lungs" rose within the compartment. Arms and legs moved about awkwardly. Men trusted themselves to the depths of the ocean without flinching because other men had told them it could be done safely.

ON THE *Saratoga's* bridge the telephone bell rang sharply. The radio C. P. O.'s voice snapped and crackled.

"Radiogram from the steamer *City of Chihuahua!*

'Report sinking of submarine V-21 by collision, approximately latitude 05.21 north, longitude 83.14 west. Rescued one survivor, Chief Boatswain Ralph Porter, thrown into sea by force of collision. V-21

closed her conning tower hatch and submerged after unavoidable accident. Am standing by, but no trace of V-21 observed.'

"End of message, sir."

There was an instant's electric shock on the *Saratoga's* bridge. Then the navigator spoke.

"My God! That's Bell—the V-21—a few hours ago. 'Approximately 05.21 north and 83.14 west'! Approximately, hell! I never knew a merchantman who could keep a course closer than three points. He don't know where in the hell he is. The V-21 may be four or five miles away from that position!"

The radio room phoned the bridge a second time.

"Message from the flagship, sir.

'Graves, Saratoga. Make every effort locate V-21.'

"End of message, sir."

The *Saratoga's* admiral spoke to the skipper.

"Lay a course for latitude 05.21 north, longitude 83.14 west. Give her everything she's got!"

Far below, in the main control room, the signals from the bridge called the engine-room of the carrier into sudden action. Cold boilers were cut in. The rising throb of power actuated the fabric of the ship as her two hundred ten thousand horses were harnessed, led into the shafts and driven hard. The admiral watched the revolution counter. His eyes were narrowed and his jaw set. He was seeing pictures of men trapped in the steel belly of a submarine. Navy men. Strangling—choking—

"They'll be sending special equipment," he told the skipper. "It's probably moving out of Panama right now. But what the hell good will it do? They have to locate the V-21 first. The bottom there is miles deep. We have to find that submarine. We have to save them time."

"Yes, sir," nodded the skipper quietly.

The word passed along the deck and ran through the below deck space like wildfire. The V-21 was sunk. The V-21 with her skipper who had the guts to smack the *Saratoga* with two torpedoes —just to be sure the umpire didn't miss a trick. That cocky little devil with his tin sardine can! Rammed and sunk!

There was a convention of pilots in the ready room. Voices lifted in loud argument.

"Hell! Why don't the Old Man turn us loose? We could get there hours ahead of the carrier. Didn't they use airplanes in the war to spot subs? Suppose those poor guys make an escape—and come up on the open sea with nothing in sight! Why don't some one tell the Old Man? Why don't he think of it?"

Lieutenant-Commander Peters came into the ready room. He looked at the sun-tanned, anxious faces.

"Well?" he demanded. "What's the speech making about?"

Buzz Martin stepped forward.

"We can find that sub, sir," he declared.

His face burned and his body crawled. He was still writhing with the humiliation of his experience.

"We can see things that no surface vessel in the world could spot. Traces of oil—buoys—men on the sea—wreckage. The boys want a crack at trying to get to the V-21 before the carrier gets there. We can save time—hours of it."

Peters grunted.

"You're a bunch of lunatics," he told them.

He turned on his heel and left the ready room. He went up on the bridge.

"We'd like to have a chance at finding the V-21, sir," he informed the admiral. "The boys believe they can do a better job of locating the submarine than a surface vessel. I'm inclined to agree with them. If there is any trace of the V-21 in the vicinity in which she sank they can find it. More, they can

comb the sea for miles around the area. If we launch them now we'd save a lot of time looking for her when the carrier arrives at the scene."

The admiral was silent for a moment.

"Anything's worth trying. Let them have the chance."

The annunciator screamed a trumpet call over the ship. Men came tumbling on deck to answer the summons to flight quarters. Men crawled in and out of ships. Starters ground and whined. Motors came to life, coughed, spat, took the charge, broke into rhythmical firing. Typhoons swept the deck. In the gray of dawn the steel propellers swung like so many revolving axes. Wing surfaces, empennages, fuselages, vibrated and shook in the sweep of that mighty storm along the deck. Men clutched at any hand hold that offered to keep themselves from being blown bodily from their feet and into a propeller.

The carrier was lunging ahead through the sea. Her speed was up to thirty knots. She flattened in the water. The wind whistled around her superstructure. The red helmets and the yellow helmets and the green helmets moved rapidly about the deck. There was a shimmering, ever changing pattern of color over the carrier.

The bedlam and inferno of motors reached a chattering frenzy as mechanics ran them up, watching instruments narrowly, alert for any indication of trouble. Men swarmed into the nettings to be clear of the working crews on deck.

The door to the ready room opened and the pilots, garbed for flight, swarmed out on deck. They were grim looking, almost defiant.

The sun burst over the eastern horizon. A red ball of glory, it transformed the sea into a restless expanse of molten brass. The pilots disappeared inside the cockpits of the planes. They squirmed about, fixing 'chute harness about bodies. Then they sat quietly, waiting for the signal to launch planes.

The fury of the typhoon and the staccato of eighty motors died to a dull, steady thumping sound like the beating of war drums.

Then the signal!

"Launch planes!"

Men dived for the eyebolts securing the planes to the deck. They cast off the restraining wires, guarding the second line of ships against disaster from the slip streams of the ships taking off. Thunderbolts hurled themselves over the bow of the carrier—out over the sea, rising, climbing. One after another at six-second intervals the planes left the deck. First, the fighters; then the attack two-seaters; then the bombers. Crews snapped the folded wings of the bombers into place almost as they rolled forward. The whine and drone of motors surged up into the very heavens above the carrier.

And the very first to go over the bow was Buzz Martin. He went with his face set in hard lines, his hand gripping the controls and his eyes staring out over the sea. After him streamed his own flight—the Horse's Necks.

At five thousand feet the planes leveled off, spread out in a wing to wing formation, drifted even farther apart, and sped away into the glare of the sun. They were headed for the last position ever reported of the V-21. Keen eyes looked down upon the tossing ocean.

The roar of the flying fleet seemed a challenge to the Fates who control the sky, the air, and the sea.

BUZZ MARTIN studied his instruments and his clock. He made calculations on his note pad. He decided he was in the tude 83.41 west. A glance showed him that all of the *Saratoga's* planes were in vicinity of latitude 05.21 north, longi- the far flung formation. They were strewn over the sky in loose formation

as far as the eye might see. They were flying in an easterly direction at slow cruising speed.

They were less than a thousand feet above the surface of the sea. Other flight leaders had made calculations and had decided that they were over the spot on the blank ocean where the V-21 had disappeared. A great circling movement began. The planes were like the spoke of a slowly turning wheel. They combed the surface of the sea.

The time was 0519.

It seemed that Chug Johnson and Buzz Martin saw the smear on the sea at the same instant. The same impulse must have moved them both. They were diving for the ocean, five hundred yards separating them, but converging upon a single spot on the water. It was an ugly thing—a splotch of dull gray shot through with little green and red and brown lights. There was no mistaking it. It was a great smear of oil—the life blood of the submarine.

Martin's heart was beating with trip hammer force. Fifty feet above the surface of the sea he pulled his Boeing level. He ripped through space above the oil smear. Close to his right wing Chug Johnson executed the same maneuver. They flew wing to wing. Buzz's eyes watched the spray and the swell. He looked for a shadow beneath the water —anything. A band of steel was tightening about his chest. It caused a terrific tension to grow up within him.

Johnson suddenly veered from the line of flight and dived at the water. He went down with his motor screaming, until it seemed he would plunge headlong into the sea, then he zoomed with a dizzy rush.

Martin looked in the direction of Johnson's dive. His heart smashed against his ribs. A buoy! A submarine position buoy! The thing that is automatically released when disaster overtakes an undersea boat. There it was. Bobbing about on the water, being tossed about, buried under the sea one instant, lost in the trough of a wave, and emerging in the next instant.

He flew over the spot. The V-21 was down there. A line ran from that buoy to her hull. She was there!

Chug had no radio. Only a flight leader carried radio. Martin flashed a message to the carrier:

> Lieutenant Johnson has located position buoy V-21, latitude and longitude approximately as given.

The answer crackled back in his ears.

> Stand by. Will arrive at 0930.

He was staring at the sea. Suddenly he brushed the back of his hand over his goggles. He stared again. The pulses in his neck throbbed heavily. Something had broken water down there. Some little thing, bobbing up from below the surface. Right against the buoy—clinging to the buoy line! Cripes! A man! A man wearing a helmet—a Momsen lung. He dived for the buoy. The man in the water lifted his hand and waved.

Then there was a second head upon the water—and after a brief instant a third. They were clustered about the buoy. They were being battered about by the sea.

Martin pulled the flotation gear ring in his Boeing. He cut the motor and sighted for the heads. He made a stall landing on the surface of the sea. There was a shadow behind him and a crackling splash. Chug Johnson was down beside him. Planes were circling overhead.

Martin's body was wet with sweat and his chest was filled with a crawling horror. He was remembering this sea but a few hours before and the thud of striking sharks against the fuselage of the Boeing . . . how they had ripped and torn at the surfacing, and how they had devoured and raged and fought over the dead and wounded killed by Tommy Bell's rifle fire.

Those men—in the water—blood on them perhaps—

He was screaming at the men in the water, beckoning to them with frantic hands. They didn't understand. They didn't know the danger. They wouldn't think about those sharks.

His eyes were glancing over the water as he urged the men to swim toward the Boeing. Without knowing it he was tearing at his own clothes. He tossed his leather coat over the side . . . snatched off his boots and trousers. His face was gray-white. His hands twitched. He saw the hands of swimming men clutching for the precarious support of the wing structure of the Boeing.

There was one man who did not swim. He floated loggily on the surface for a moment, his helmet turned to the sun in ghastly mockery of a human face. Then he disappeared. Martin, hardly knowing what he did, dived over the side of the Boeing, fought the heavy water, caught a breath, dived again, found the man's body, brought him to the surface.

The man's hands clutched for Martin's throat. Martin struck him savagely on the jaw with a closed fist. The man became inert. Martin towed him to Chug's Boeing. Chug reached over the side of the cockpit, dragged him out of the water, balanced him over the camel-back.

More heads popped up from below the surface of the Pacific. They were always preceded by a bubble which broke —and the head emerged from the bubble. The men seemed dazed for the first minute. It took them time to understand they were in the light of day—and living.

Twice Martin went over the side to bring unconscious men out of the water.

Dorsal fins slipped through the water. Martin heard Chug's scream of warning. He saw a fin cut the water ahead of him—ten feet away. He yelled and splashed with his hands. He swam desperately back to his own ship. He scrambled aboard, pulled himself into the cockpit.

An amphibian landed and charged in among the sharks with its motor racing and stuttering like a dozen machine guns. The sharks flitted away. The amphib kept taxiing around the two Boeings on the water with the precious lives clinging to the wings.

There was an interval when no more heads came to the surface. At the end of the interval one head bounced above the water. The helmet turned in all directions. The man sighted the planes. He ripped the helmet from his head. He became McGrath. He swam to Buzz's plane.

"Tommy! Coming up!" he gasped. "Trouble with his helmet. Bumped it against something!"

A head appeared close to the buoy. Hands reached out of the water and fought with the helmet. Then the hands slowly relaxed. The head dropped, touched the water.

Martin dived over the side of his Boeing again. He swam toward the buoy. His spine was aflame. He was waiting for the rush and surge of a slate-gray body—the ripping teeth to snatch the flesh from his bones. He could feel the tail of a shark lashing at him through every foot of that swim.

He grabbed Tommy Bell just as Bell was sinking loggily. He pulled him to the surface. He tore the helmet from Bell's head. Bell's face was almost black. He towed Bell to Chug's ship. Chug pulled the V-21's skipper up on the camel-back.

Buzz rested on the water, floating, one hand holding on to the Boeing's stabilizer. He was gasping for breath. His lungs seemed clogged with molten lead. His eyes seemed about to burst from his head. Dully he heard the amphib cruising about to frighten sharks away. He was too tired to swim another stroke!

Chug Johnson straddled the camel

back and crawled to the tail of the ship. He lifted Buzz out of the water. Carried him forward with their combined weights submerging the tail of the Boeing. He balanced him on the camel-back beside Tommy Bell.

After a while Martin could breathe and the pounding in his ears subsided. He turned his head. He saw a pair of eyes looking at him. Tommy Bell's eyes —bloodshot—Bell's face—ghastly blue-white.

"Martin!" whispered Bell hoarsely. "By the living three-toed Buddha! Buzz Martin!"

Martin forced his wracked body to sit erect on the camel-back and his face to assume a bored expression.

"Well," he drawled languidly. "Lieutenant Bell. Fawncy meeting you here. Is this not a queer manner of turning to for swimming call? Strange people, you sardine can sailors. Fawncy anchoring one's boat on the bottom of the ocean when one goes swimming. A balmy practice, to say the least."

Bell's mouth moved.

"You go to hell!" he invited. But there was a queer, white grin on his face.

"Thank you, no. I'll stick to flying," answered Martin sweetly. "I'm sure I wouldn't like the submarine service."

The *Saratoga's* planes hovered overhead. The amphibs were all on the water. After a while it was possible to shift some of the rescued men to the amphibs and to lighten the floating Boeings; to make the men in the water more comfortable, more secure.

AT 0925 the *Saratoga* came racing into the picture. At 0926 her boats were picking up the V-21's men, transferring them aboard, putting them in the sick bay, pumping hot coffee and other things into them. She hoisted the water-logged Boeings onto her deck and took the amphibs aboard. The arrestor gear crew went into the nettings. The barrier went down, the landing signal flew, and the *Saratoga's* brood dropped down from the sky onto her deck, to be whisked away by the taxi-crews, and secured again to the eye-bolts. The landing proceeded without a hitch. A plane down every twenty-three seconds, until they were all aboard.

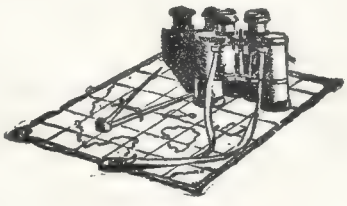
Lieutenant Bell insisted upon reporting to the bridge before accepting medical or other attention. He stood rigidly, his body shivering and his teeth chattering. He was dripping water. It ran over the bridge from a pool at his feet. He saluted with great exactitude.

"Lieutenant Bell reporting aboard, sir!"

There were little crinkles at the corners of the admiral's eyes and the line of his mouth twitched once or twice.

"Ah, yes, Lieutenant Bell," he said musingly. "Why—certainly—I seem to remember you. You're one of Admiral Dale's bright young men! Well, well. And how is the submarine business, lieutenant?"

What Lieutenant Bell said to himself was not written in the log.



DAMNED BEACHCOMBER

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

CAPTAIN BEAUGARD was thoroughly disgusted. He looked at the cynical, unshaven young man in dirty whites, leaning against a palm and smoking a cigarette. He looked at Brenner, the trader, perspiring over all his three chins and scowling darkly. And lastly he looked at the barkentine *Cynthia*, anchored out in the aching blue of the Pacific beyond the white thunder of reefs, and nearly a mile from the beach.

"What in hell will I do with him?" he demanded. "I've got a full crew. And anyway, why load me up with drunken beachcombers?"

"The name is Carson, Aubrey Carson," Brenner explained, fanning himself with his sun-helmet and waving at the young man against the palm. "Get him out of here, that's all I care."

"Don't mind my feelings," said Aubrey Carson politely. "The discussion interests me. I feel like a barrel of pork put up for sale. And no buyers, it seems."

"You shut up!" roared Captain Beaugard. He glared at Brenner again. "Who in hell left him here?"

"Jennings of the *Flying Bird*. The idiot had a notion he wanted to see the Islands and bought a passage. Been on a long bust in Sydney, I gather. Jennings loaded fifty cases of Scotch for him, and the maniac kept half the crew drunk from Brisbane to the Solomons. Jennings would have stood for it at that, I guess, but he found out Carson's money was about gone so he took what was left and dumped him here. On me! I don't want him. I've fed him for three weeks and he's been stealing my gin. So you get him out!"

"Why, Mr. Brenner," Carson ad-

monished. "Surely my company and conversation were worth a meal or two and a drink occasionally."

"I said shut up!" roared Captain Beaugard again. "Why I should dirty my decks with you is more than I can gather. No, Brenner, I don't want him."

"I haven't got the plague," murmured Carson. "And I'm considered quite amusing at times."

Brenner scowled at him.

"Too damned amusing!" He faced the fuming captain and his voice grew hard. "I ship a thousand tons of copra a year, Beaugard. Enough to ask a favor. I could always change ships, of course."

Captain Beaugard choked. He was a big man, and impatient. Broad and black-bearded and hard. He was not used to dictation . . . but a thousand tons of copra!

"If you put it that way," he said bitterly, "I'll take him off your hands. I'll break his damned neck. I'll make him wish he'd never been born."

"I was afraid of that," Carson sighed. "And really, captain, you mustn't bear a grudge. This is Brenner's idea, not mine. I'd like to stay."

"Get down to my boat," gritted the captain. "Or do I have to kick you down?"

"No, I can walk," observed the young man, and he wandered to the water's edge where the longboat waited. They pulled out to the barkentine and the captain ordered Carson aft while he gave some instructions to the mate.

"It looks," Carson reflected, "as if I'm in for it."

He needed a drink. He needed a drink badly. But there was no prospect of him getting one and he winced at the thought of what he must suffer before the craving passed. He lighted his last cigarette, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly hold the match, and then he became aware that a girl was watching him.

"Oh, pardon me," he said. "The name's Carson."

"You're a remarkable specimen," she said coldly. "When did you last take the trouble to wash?"

Carson's vision was a bit unsteady but he gathered a pleasing impression of violet eyes and close-cropped brown hair the wind was lifting and ruffling, and instinct caused him to remove his battered sun-helmet.

"Wash?" he said vaguely. "Oh, a week or so ago. I've been extremely busy."

"Drinking," she agreed dryly. "You look disgusting and smell worse."

"Naturally," Carson explained. "Brenner confiscated my baggage to pay for what he pleasantly called food. You must excuse me, Miss—er—"

"Miss Beaugard, to be exact," she said. Her calm eyes ran slowly over his fine height, from his dirty shoes to his uncut hair and bristle of dark beard, and she made a grimace of distaste that disturbed him not at all.

"A college man from your accent," she observed. "Well, there are a lot like you in the Islands. Some of you are just plain no good. The rest of you run into one tough break, then fold up and quit. What was it this time? Gambling or women?"

That got him. Even she could see that. He went quite white and his mouth tightened. Something of his easy, half-bantering air departed from him and he stared at her narrow-eyed.

"If it would interest you," he said stiffly, "it was a woman."

She shrugged, resting her slim brown hands on the rail and glancing at the receding loom of the island.

"She showed good judgment when she threw you over then," she observed. "The *Cynthia* might make a man of you but you'll quit at the first opportunity. Your kind always does."

"Does it?" he said, white-lipped now. The irony and contempt of her tone stung him. He could not understand

why. He thought he was beyond all that. "Does it!"

A great hand reached over his shoulder and jerked the cigarette away.

"Smoking on my poop deck!" roared Captain Beaugard. "Where the hell do you think you are?"

Carson turned and met an iron fist flush on the mouth so that he jarred back against the rail and then fell.

"And keep away from my daughter," the captain rasped. "You drunken swine."

"I spoke to him first," observed the girl, untruthfully.

Her father glared at her.

"You're supposed to be my supercargo. Haven't you got anything to do besides talking to a damned beachcomber? Get up!"

He kicked Carson viciously and Carson got up, wiping blood from his lips with a shaking hand.

"I wouldn't do that again," he said quietly. "It isn't at all necessary."

"You wouldn't do—?" Captain Beaugard choked and swung from the hip. Carson dropped to the scuppers, clawed to his hands and knees and then came up fighting. And he was in no condition for fighting after two years of steady drinking and lack of exercise. There was an ugly minute on the *Cynthia's* poop and Carson was in the scuppers again, nearly stunned and bleeding generously. Captain Beaugard faced forward and roared for his mate.

"Mr. Glisson! Put this ape to work. A spell of chipping cables might do to start. The rust won't hurt him." He swung back to Carson. "Come below after supper and I'll sign you as passage worker to Singapore to make things legal. Dollar a month and you're not worth it. I'll get even with Brenner for this."

He strode away and Helen Beaugard surveyed the battered wreck in the scuppers with dispassionate interest. She had sailed with her father too long to be disturbed by a little man-handling.

"You'd better make the best of it," she advised. "He can be a lot worse when he extends himself."

Carson weaved to his feet and peered at her out of one rapidly closing eye. His voice was hoarse and tight with a bleak anger.

"It seems to be a sweet little family all around," he managed. "But you can tell him from me I'll tear his face off if it's the last thing I do!"

He stumbled forward then with the big mate jabbing his shoulder for speed, and Helen Beaugard looked after him, her eyes a little thoughtful, a furrow between her fine brows and her lower lip caught between her teeth. She had a hunch.

"I don't think you need have beaten up Carson," she said to her father a short time later. "He doesn't know the ropes and he wasn't protesting any."

Her father looked at her and growled.

"What the devil do you care? Does 'em good to be handled. He'll quit at the first port, anyway. They always do."

"I'll make a bet," she told him crisply. "A new dress to a case of Scotch."

"What's the bet?"

"That Carson doesn't quit at the first port."

"Bah!" snapped her father. "You're on, and you're crazy. They always quit."

"Carson won't," she assured him. "He's got a little job to do before he leaves the *Cynthia*."

"What sort of a job?"

"You'll discover that," she observed, "when he tears your face off."

And that was so funny it kept Captain Beaugard in a good humor for the rest of the day.

THE following week was for Aubrey Carson quite the most terrible period in his life. Every sinew and fiber of his alcohol-poisoned body screamed and protested and craved for relief. He could

not eat. His head was a dull, aching bell. His limbs shook with ague and he was covered with unnatural sweats. Once he even went so far, when the torment became unbearable, as to strain the alcohol from a can of stolen shellac and find a temporary oblivion with the aid of that vicious liquor. He was violently ill afterward.

To add to his peculiar misery there were the implacable two mates, the bosun, and a hard-case forecastle of fifteen men who despised him as a landsman and a failure, and they made him the butt of the ship. He was given all the filthy jobs. Jerked from his bunk at ungodly hours to make coffee, bring water or wash clothes for anyone who chose to command him. And in spite of his somewhat impressive size he was too sick to protest. There were times when he thought he was going to die, and other times when he was afraid he wasn't. One thing alone kept him going at first, and that was a steady and increasing hatred for Captain Beaugard, such a hatred that it finally became an obsession.

He might not have reached this condition had the captain let him alone. He might have allowed the bitter memory of that unnecessary thrashing the first day on board to sink into oblivion. Such had been his habit with other memories and troubles during the past two years. But he had no liquor to help him now, and Captain Beaugard himself kept the memory green. He seemed to take a curious and personal interest in driving Aubrey Carson nearly insane, and so marked was it that even Mr. Glisson, the mate, who rarely seemed to notice anything, began to wonder.

"You certainly don't like that beachcomber," he observed one day. "I guess he thinks he's in hell."

"I've got nothing against him." Captain Beaugard snapped. "Not a damned thing, except when I think of Brenner making me take him. But he's got to quit at the first port."

"Well, you can always fire him," the mate pointed out. "That is, if you don't want him around."

"No, I can't fire him," the captain said. "He's got to quit of his own accord."

"Of his own accord?" demanded the mate, scratching his head. "I don't understand."

"Well, you wouldn't," growled the captain. "But there's a case of Scotch involved. So give him hell." And Mr. Glisson dutifully thought up innumerable unpleasant jobs and gave Carson hell.

It was some days before Helen Beaugard became aware of all this, but when she did she was openly mutinous.

"You're not playing fair," she told her father angrily. "I didn't expect you to run Carson off the ship. He's got to have a chance, keep normal watches the same as the other men, and do the same work. You're finding work for him we've never had done on the *Cynthia* before, and he's kept on deck half of his watch below."

"All's fair in love and war," quoted the captain with a complacent grin. "A bet's a bet. Carson'll be so damned glad to get off this ship he'll start swimming before we anchor."

"All right!" snapped his daughter. "Two can play that game. You do what you can to drive him off and I'll do what I can to keep him on."

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute," Captain Beaugard said uneasily. He knew his daughter and he'd made bets with her before. "Just what's on your mind?"

"That," she said, "is my business. As you say, a bet's a bet."

Captain Beaugard took off his peaked cap and scratched his head.

Aubrey Carson, kneeling over and scraping pitch from the seams of a scorching deck beneath a brassy tropic sun, was suddenly conscious of a scant

but grateful shadow falling upon him. He sighed and looked up. Such a shadow was usually the boatswain or the mate coming to see why he wasn't working faster. But this time it was Helen Beaugard.

"Well," he managed, with a trace of the old banter. "Would you care to join me?"

"Not at all; that's a very messy job," she said, smiling and cool in a white skirt and waist, with a floppy-brimmed straw hat shading her face. "I just wanted to ask you how you were getting along."

"Remarkably well," he assured her, straightening to his feet with a groan and looking down at her. His mouth was mocking but his eyes were like flint, and clear for the first time in months. "I am living like a hog with fifteen other hogs, and with three or four super-hogs driving us all. It's a very fascinating experience."

She nodded and surveyed him frankly. The liquor had already sweated out of him, the bloat of it turned to firmer muscle. He would, she thought, in another week or so, be in first class condition. And he was a big man, with powerful shoulders. She thought of her father and laughed a little.

"You weren't so very much above a hog when you first came on board," she reminded him severely. "Several years of liquor swilling has a distinct savor of the trough."

"Your language, dear lady, is as charming as your father's idea of justice," he said drily. "And now if you will excuse me—" He started to kneel on the blistering deck again but she caught his arm.

"We don't have to be so unpleasant to each other, do we?" she inquired. "I don't mean everything I say. And I think I can understand how it is a man can go to pieces over something, some misfortune, over a woman. It's weak, perhaps. But human. Forgive me. I'm sure you will eventually make good."

His eyes did not soften but a flicker of puzzlement came into them and she sensed the bitterness that filled him.

"Is this an uplift lecture?" he inquired acidly. "I'm really not interested."

She flushed a little and bit her lip.

"Oh, don't be such a fool!" she snapped. "I want to help you. You are, or were, a gentleman. I think you will be again." She looked at his growth of beard and at his matted hair. "I suppose you are still without simple necessities?"

He smiled then.

"My fellow hogs refuse to loan me even a razor. It seems I look funnier as I am."

She held out a small bundle and he took it involuntarily.

"I imagined as much," she said. "So I brought a few things along. Captain Beaugard is opening the slop-chest tonight and you can apply for clothes. As a passage worker you'll have to pay cash for them but I think you'll find sufficient in the package."

He stared at her, his jaw dropping. For once in his life he was incapable of speech.

"But why, why—" He was genuinely astonished.

"My reasons wouldn't interest you," she observed serenely. "But it's a matter of a new dress." And she left him before he could gather any speech at all. On the poop deck she cornered Mr. Glisson the mate.

"Mr. Glisson," she said. "I've decided to have my room cleaned out and painted over. You might send a man aft first thing in the morning."

"What's the matter with the steward?" inquired the mate sourly. "He's supposed to attend to the cabins."

"The man I want," said Helen Beaugard firmly, "is Carson. You'll see to it, won't you."

"I—" started the mate and then stopped. When Helen Beaugard's violet eyes took on just that look there was

no use in arguing, and she reminded one very strongly of her father. So Mr. Glisson closed his mouth and nodded. He mentioned the matter to Captain Beaugard later on and the captain swore.

"I knew it!" he snapped. "I knew it! But I suppose I've got to give her a break."

IT WAS a distinctly uneasy and somewhat suspicious Aubrey Carson who presented himself in the main cabin at eight o'clock the following morning. Captain Beaugard was on the poop with both mates, and the steward was in the galley helping the cook. So Helen Beaugard was alone to survey her handiwork with satisfaction and even some surprise. Carson was a different man in a clean cotton singlet and duck pants. The growth of beard gone she saw a finely-drawn lean face, not unhandsome, and the rough but efficient cutting of his hair had brought to clearness the outlines of a well-shaped head.

"Quite an improvement," she observed. He was uncomfortable and she rather enjoyed the fact. She had always been slightly annoyed by his usual cynicism and assurance. "I take it you are feeling much better."

"I feel less like an inmate of a menagerie," he agreed drily. "But may I inquire how I am to repay you for the money you advanced?"

"Twenty dollars, wasn't it?" she said. "Ah, yes. Well, you can repay me from your wages."

His eyes smoldered.

"At a dollar a month," he observed acidly, "you will have to wait for a considerable time."

"Well," she shrugged, "you can always run away from the ship. I'll just put it down as a bad debt."

Her eyes, faintly mocking, met his and a flush ran up slowly from his throat.

"I—I have not yet gone so far as to accept money from a woman," he managed icily. "I shall pay you!" He took his eyes from hers with an effort and looked brusquely around. "Well, what do I have to do?"

"Oh, yes. We must get to work," she agreed. "First off we'll transfer my things to a spare cabin. And then you can clean this place out."

He said nothing after that but worked in silence, transferring trunks and packages at her crisp direction, in a sort of grim, tight fury that made his every movement a savage one, as if he would like to tear to pieces whatever he held. Captain Beaugard looked in on them once, scowling, but he said nothing, and when his daughter made a mocking grimace at him he stamped away with a muffled oath and left them alone again.

When the eight bells, noon, went, Carson straightened and tightened his belt.

"This is my watch below," he reminded her. "Shall I return at four?"

"You're on day work, not on watches, until you're finished here," she said crisply. "Come back as soon as you've eaten."

He looked at her and hesitated, on the verge of rebellion, and with a sudden impulse she crossed the cabin and closed the door.

"I've an idea what you're thinking," she said steadily. "Forget it. I'm not trying to make a fool of you. You've got something in you that shouldn't be allowed to rot. The fact you've recovered some pride shows that. Hating my father and me won't help you. It only makes things worse for you. I know you've had a hard time on the *Cynthia*, harder even than it should have been. I insisted on having you for this job to give you something of a square break. Life may be a mess so far as you're concerned, but give it a chance and be a good sport."

He was still and silent for a long moment, staring at her, and a little muscle began to twitch in his throat.

She turned, a little hesitantly, to open the door.

"What you just said, about giving life a chance and all that, means a lot to me. It's the first time anyone's had any faith in me. So I'm glad. Yes, glad the other —she turned me down and married. If she hadn't I would never have known there was such a ship as the *Cynthia*." His voice dropped until she could hardly hear him. "Or anyone like you."

She looked at him then with sudden new interest, as if she had never really seen him before. Her violet eyes widened and her warm lips parted to show a hint of pearly teeth. He was not mocking now, not smiling and amused. He was very grave, deeply moved, and with a touch of wistfulness in his voice. She felt disturbed, and then as she met his eyes a queer tingling came to her and all unbidden something passed between them far deeper than words. The warm blood crept to her face.

"I shall be back," he promised and was gone. She remained as she was for some time, thinking wildly, half-ashamed, half-exultant. A wave of maternal solicitude for him came over her too. She must stand with him, he needed her.

After a while she went somewhat shakily into the main cabin where Captain Beaugard and the mate were seated at the food-laden table. Something in his daughter's face drew the captain's irritable attention.

"You're a pretty smart young lady, eh?" he snapped. "Giving him a soft job and getting him cleaned and dressed up. Well, it won't work. You can have him until your room's done and then I'll take charge again. And this time he'll know what trouble really is."

She looked at him, her eyes misty but unafraid.

"We reach Tobangas, the next port, in a week or so," she said. "You still think he'll quit there?"

"I'll make him quit," promised the captain. "I'll make him quit if it's the last thing I do. I can use that Scotch."

Helen Beaugard laughed as at some inward joke, and she leaned across the table to smooth her father's cheek.

"You're sure," she said. "You're so very sure. Well, I'll double the bet!"

When Carson returned aft later there was a curious strained tension between them, but different from the one they had endured that morning. There was a kind of subdued understanding and happiness in it, and Helen found herself humming gaily. She noticed Carson's face in the full light from the porthole after a while and she gave an exclamation. His lips were split and one eye was puffed.

"Have you been fighting?" she demanded.

He laughed.

"It was nothing much. Just a little trouble in the fo'c's'le."

Explanation came not long afterwards when Captain Beaugard clattered down the companion from the poop. He glared into the cabin where the two were busily at work and temper crackled in his voice.

"What in hell do you mean, beating up Sanders?" he roared at Carson. "One of my best men. He's got two cracked ribs and a broken jaw. Be laid up for a week or so. I've a good mind to tar you down, you drunken ape. If there's any fighting to be done on this ship I'll do it myself. Is that clear? And while Sanders is laid up you can do his work as well as your own."

Carson straightened and faced the irate captain.

"Do you want Miss Beaugard's name dirtied by a lot of fo'c's'le hogs?" he said quietly. The captain was rigid for a moment and dangerous lights flickered in his eyes.

"Was that what the trouble was about?"

"I thought I implied as much," said Carson drily.

Captain Beaugard rubbed his beard and his scowl darkened.

"Well, keep your damned hands to

yourself," he growled at last. "Sanders is worth six of you so far as the ship's concerned."

He went back on deck and Helen looked at Carson, who had reddened.

"So you were fighting for me," she said gently. "I'm sorry it was necessary."

He shrugged and attempted a laugh.

"Well, you know how men are. Hardly Sanders' fault. They saw you speaking to me on the foredeck yesterday and they know I'm aft here helping you now. Bound to be talk."

"I'm very grateful," she said. "If there is anything I can do—"

"You've done enough," he said shortly. "Only—" He hesitated and looked at her.

"Only what?"

He was definitely embarrassed then.

"Only what?" she insisted.

"If I could see you sometime and talk. I know it's a lot to ask . . . my being what I still am. But—" He could not finish and bent furiously to work again. She considered him for a long moment, her lower lip between her teeth, and she felt a strange weakness inside her.

"I— I sometimes go midships for a walk," she said faintly. "After dark."

ON THE poop above Captain Beaugard was speaking to Mr. Glisson and he was both irritated and mystified.

"Him licking Sanders is what gets me," the captain said. "Why, damn it, Sanders is tough. What does he want to let a blasted gin-soaked beachcomber take him to the cleaners for?"

"You seem to forget Carson's had over three weeks to get the liquor sweated out of him," said the mate drily. "And maybe you haven't noticed his shoulders."

"Bah!" snapped the captain. "I could smear him in a minute with one hand and a foot tied."

The mate coughed.

"The bo's'un was telling me," he observed, "that somehow or the other after the fight the men got it out of Carson that in his college days he'd been amateur heavyweight champion of New South Wales."

The captain blew his nose with unnecessary vigor.

"Kid stuff!" he exploded. "Amateur boxer! What use is that in a roughhouse? I like men salty and fighting with all hands and feet."

"Well, Sanders is no lady in his fights," commented the mate. Captain Beaugard blew his nose again.

"Sanders must have been crippled or sick or drunk or something this time. I'll fire him at Singapore."

He felt that Carson was getting under his skin more than ever. It annoyed him. It very nearly infuriated him. First he had to ship the man against his will and under what amounted to compulsion. That was enough to raise his bile. Then he had to go and make a bet with his daughter, and he had more than a suspicion he was going to lose. Now, to cap it all, that damned beachcomber and lily-fingered college drunk had gone and put his best able seaman in his bunk for a week. It didn't make sense. Captain Beaugard felt that for his own self-respect and the honor of the *Cynthia* he would himself have to tar Carson down again.

It was after four bells, ten o'clock that night, when Helen Beaugard joined the shadowy figure leaning on the port bulwarks just abaft the mainmast. She had not come without certain hesitations. She had all the pride of the poop deck, of a captain's daughter, and she considered the men of the forecastle so far beneath her that any social contact with them was unthinkable. And now here she was meeting on the main deck a man who was not even a good seaman, who was nothing at all, a beachcomber picked up from an obscure island, without prospects or future. Yet she had had to come. She had known that from the

first, when she had implied the meeting. Her blood was pounding hard, her head doing strange things.

"Oh," she said, uncertainly. "So you're here."

He turned and gazed at her in the dim starlight.

"It was very good of you to come," he said gently. "You can't know what it means to me."

"Perhaps," she whispered through dry lips. "Perhaps I do."

Neither of them knew quite how the time passed after that. There were long silences when they both stared at the sky or at the glinting phosphorescence in the water bubbling alongside. There were conversations broken off abruptly and for no apparent reason, and there were longer ones when much was made plain. He told her of his life, wasted and futile, all but wrecked. Of the woman he had lost and the gay times he had had in Sydney. All unbidden she too found herself recounting the years since she had left school to sail with her father, the ports she had seen, the men who had made love to her. But they hardly heard each other for all that, speaking as it were from the surface while beneath strong currents swept and hammered. Eight bells, midnight, went then, and they started.

"So late?" she said. "I must be going."

"I suppose so," he agreed regretfully. He hesitated and then took her hand.

"Thank you again," he said huskily. "It's been wonderful. The most wonderful night of my life. I, Helen—"

"Yes," she whispered in involuntary acquiescence. She found herself tight against him then, his lips warm on hers, and then he was gone, running forward with a half-choked and utterly unintelligible cry. She rested against the bulwarks for a moment, and then she made a slow way back to her own room. She hardly knew what had happened, except that everything was changed. She had never believed that everything could change so.

CAPTAIN BEAUGARD was thoroughly disgusted. The fussy, evil-smelling tug had just finished pushing the *Cynthia* alongside the rickety wharf at the little island port of Tobangas. The lines were out; native stevedores were already padding about the decks. And almost to a man the forecastle was dressing ready to go ashore. But there stood that damned Carson, leaning on the bulwarks and gazing at the white-walled town with obviously no intent to quit.

His clothes, new a week or so before, were torn and work-stained now. He looked tired, even drained. He was distinctly thinner and Captain Beaugard knew he must be sick for need of sleep. Yet there he stood, staring dreamily at the town and his thoughts apparently miles away. Just as his thoughts had been miles away all during that last harassing week. It made Captain Beaugard sick.

If ever a man had been hazed Aubrey Carson had. Not even on the hell ships of the clipper times had any one man been driven so. What he had been compelled to undergo during the first weeks of his being on board the barkentine had been paradise compared to the last few days. With Captain Beaugard it had gone far beyond the point of merely winning a bet. He definitely hated Carson. The man baffled him. He should have cracked and he hadn't cracked. He should have been a whimpering wreck by the time Tobangas was reached and he was nothing of the sort. Captain Beaugard felt there was some sort of a vital issue involved. He must be losing his grip. First Brenner had forced the man on him; then he had boasted he would make the man quit at the first port; and now there the man was with no intention of quitting.

Everything that could be done had been done. He had Carson dragged from

his bunk at all odd hours for the slimmest of reasons or for no reason at all. He kept him on deck when his watch went below. He abused him within hearing of all. He called him every name he could lay his tongue to. He had him down in the stifling fetor of the bilges, scooping out the filth there. He had had him oiling down spars in the heat of tropic noons. He kept him on his knees for hours, holystoning already spotless decks, and then deliberately soiled the planking so the work would have to be done over again. It was so bad that even the forecastle murmured. It wasn't human, let alone just. But Carson did not seem to mind. He did not even seem to know what it was all about. He seemed to live in a dream, from which he emerged with a start only at long intervals and to vaguely answer questions. Yes, it baffled Captain Beaugard and he did not like to be baffled, certainly not by damned beachcombers and on his own ship.

What was more curious, he thought, was that his daughter had made no further protests about his unreasonable attitude. She had not mentioned the bet again, nor even asked for Carson to do other and lighter work for her. She too seemed strangely abstract these times. It was as if the two of them lived entirely apart from the ship and from all physical pleasures or discomforts. And yet so far as the captain knew they never looked at each other or spoke to each other. He had had a faint suspicion that his daughter might have caused Carson to fall for her, to make certain he remained on the *Cynthia* beyond the first port of call, but if she had Carson certainly acted like no man in love he'd ever known. He cursed and bit into a fresh cigar.

"Hey, you!" he shouted. He had to shout three times before Carson turned and came aft. And that did not improve the captain's temper.

"You drunken ape," be began unpleasantly. "Isn't this where you get off? Haven't you had enough?"

"Enough?" said Carson. He looked at the captain as if he did not understand the language. "Enough?"

"Yes, enough, damn you!" the captain exploded. "Get off my ship. If you won't go of your own free will I'll fire you!"

Carson looked disturbed for the first time.

"You couldn't do that," he observed.

"Oh, I couldn't. I suppose because I signed you at a dollar a month you think I'll be glad to keep a cheap man. Well, I'm not. You're the worst paid man on board here and at that you're an expense."

Carson eyed him queerly. He had done the work of at least any three other men and he did not comprehend this unreasoning danger. He started to protest; then he saw Helen Beaugard emerge from the main cabin scuttle and he forgot the captain entirely.

"I said get out!" the captain roared.

He became aware that his daughter was near him then and he twisted the cigar in his mouth and growled aside.

"I'll concede the bet. But I'm kicking him off anyway. I don't like him and he's caused more trouble than enough already."

"You can't put him ashore here," said the girl calmly.

"Why can't I?" The captain gathered fresh rage. "Are you telling me what I can or can't do too?"

"He signed for a passage to Singapore if you remember," she observed. "And since he's done his work and obeyed orders you've no grounds for discharging him."

Captain Beaugard was struck dumb for a moment. And then he recovered.

"Look here," he began, and abruptly stopped. They were not paying the slightest attention to him. They were looking at each other with a gaze so intent it fascinated even the captain. It

dawned on him that matters had gone beyond his control.

"You," he managed at last. "You've fallen for this drunken rat? A daughter of mine? A dollar a month beachcomber. The worst paid man on the ship. Why, damn you—" He took a stride that brought him flush against Carson.

"Get out!" he shouted. "Get out before I throw you on the dock." He said more, mostly unprintable.

Carson shifted his gaze than and focused it. And he smiled, thinly, calmly and dangerously.

"I wouldn't use such language," he observed. "There's a lady present. And I think you mentioned I'm the worst paid man on board. You're wrong. You're quite wrong. I'm the best paid member of your crew."

"You mean what?" roared Captain Beaugard. He shot another look at his daughter and a ghastly suspicion seized him. "You mean you and Helen—" He choked and his face went purple. "The best paid? You mean—" He could not get out the words and his control snapped. He swung wide and Carson staggered back, a red mark on his cheek.

"Ive been holding this for a long time," the captain grated, and without further words he bored in.

"Father!" Helen cried but no one heard her. The two men were reeling across the poop, their breaths quick and hard, the clean smack of blows sickening the girl who had always thought man-stuff so natural before. She ran to get between them but it was over before she could. There was a sharp crack like a breaking stick and Captain Beaugard slumped to his knees, pitched forward and collapsed, half-unconscious. Carson stook back, smiling faintly and nursing his knuckles. He looked at Helen Beaugard, shiny-eyed and steady. He looked at the blue sky above; at the jungle beyond Tobangas; at the masts and spars of the *Cynthia*; at his sun-blackened arms, sinewy and strong; and lastly he looked at Captain Beaugard, clawing unsteadily to his feet.

"All wrong, captain," he laughed. "The worst paid man on board, you said. No, the best paid. Paid in a lot of other things besides money. Like being able to knock you down. I couldn't have done it a month ago but I can do it now. I can lick you any time and in any place, and you know it. The best paid. That was what I meant!"

Captain Beaugard got himself erect at last and shook his head to clear it of the mists. Never in his life before had he been knocked off his feet and the shame sickened him. Yes, he was licked. There was power in that young man's fists and he himself was getting old. He felt it now. No sense denying the thing. The damned beachcomber could tear his face off any time and in any place. No need to experiment any further in regard to that. He was still dizzy and shaken from the one last blow. His rage and shame ebbed after a while, and because he was at heart a sailor and a man he made his concession. Perhaps the sight of his daughter standing beside Carson and with her arm about him, looking transfigured up into his face helped matters too.

"There used to be a rule in the old times," he said slowly. "When a man could lick another he got his job. I can't give you mine, that's certain, but the second mate's quitting at Singapore. You're all right, Carson. You've come through. And you can soon learn the ropes."

"Father!" cried Helen. "Then you do understand! Aubrey and I—"

Carson crossed the poop and held out his hand.

"That's fine of you, sir. You've hired a new second mate."

"And the pay?" said the captain maliciously.

"A dollar a month or nothing," Carson told him. "It doesn't matter. I'll still be the best paid man on board!"

Before the Beggar of the Sea could bring down his cutlass a rusty pike thwacked his Dutch shinbone.

BLOOD ON THE SWORDS

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

THE big fellow had but a single attack—a cross with his left foot and a high-starting, oblique, downward slash. Evidently some master had tried to teach him at least the *squalembrato;* but the result was indescribably awkward. Roger didn't even attempt to parry, didn't even take out his dagger. He was sorry he'd been fool enough to come to the field with this clumsy fellow. He had nothing against him.

Again the left cross, that high-reaching sword arm. Roger retreated a cat-step, and, moving only his right wrist, slashed open the muscles of the fellow's shoulder. He might easily have slid his rapier through the heart.

It ended the meeting. The big fellow fumed considerably, insisting that the fight be continued. His right arm was limp, true, and bleeding badly; but he would use his left; Captain Vambrace *must* give him satisfaction! Roger only sighed, turned away, wiped his blade with a handkerchief, and then sheathed, bowed, and rejoined Bones John and Walter, who were having difficulty keeping grins from their faces. The big fellow still was spluttering when these three started back for the palace.

"It will be a long day before that ruffler gives you the lie again," Bones John crowed.

But Roger Vambrace shook his head.

"Nay, I sicken of this. We do naught here but play with toys like children."

They understood, and respected his mood. They rode in silence after that. Roger Vambrace, a fourth son, three years before had taken himself and his slender patrimony into France, where he had engaged exuberantly in the civil

war, fighting for the Huguenots.

When a truce was arranged, he had traveled into Italy, and there he had studied not books and music so much as the art of the fence, under Manciolino the Marozzo, the Bolognese masters. Penniless, then, he had returned to his native land to become a gentleman-usher for some great nobleman.

He would have preferred Leicester or Christopher Hatton, or possibly even the arrogant young Devonshire upstart Raleigh, but his family influence was sufficient only to get him a post under the Lord Treasurer, gaunt, prosaic, peace-loving Burghley. So that now, surrounded by his men, Bones John and Fat John, Walter and Andrew and Dover Harry—professional soldiers, former jailbirds who had attached themselves to him after the French treaty had left them without support, for they could not otherwise get back to their native land—now he was used most of the time as a mere messenger, a minor diplomat, a go-between. He might as well be a secretary! Or a common clerk! This was no exisitance for one who was perhaps as good a swordsman as the whole kingdom could show.

Back in the palace, they played primero at a half penny a point. Fat John and Andrew and Dover Harry, who because of other duties had been unable to witness the duello, only nodded and grinned when they learned of its outcome. They never had doubted it.

Roger played sullenly, slapping the cards upon the table; and because of this there was very little conversation.

These five attendants were not mere servants, yet neither were they gentlemen. Roger, though he called them by their first names, never "thou"-ed them. By those of equal or lower rank they were saluted as "Master." They professed no fealty to Burghley, except as he was Captain Vambrace's lord. They served Captain Vambrace alone.

"Cards, cards, all the day long," Roger grumbled, "except when my lord finds some lackey's errand for me and—"

A servant was in the doorway. He stared at Roger. Roger rose.

"Doubtless a scolding because of the ruffle. Play on, lads. I'll rejoin you soon."

He went out, following the servant.

WILLIAM CECIL, Lord Burghley, was longish, and thin, middle-aged, prematurely gray. By ordinary his expression was solemn as any bishop's, but this morning he seemed worried, cross.

"Another duello, I hear?"

"Aye, m'lord. There was naught else for it. The fellow—"

"No matter! I've something of higher import here."

He was frowning a little. He started to wave a quill, schoolmaster-like.

"Now heed me well, Master Vambrace. 'Tis excitement you've lacked since you've entered my service, eh? Often you've wailed for it?"

Roger started a polite denial, but the Lord Treasurer waved him to silence.

"Well, I've a mission calling for a swordsman and a gambler, but it comes to me that mayhap you'll be none too eager to accept of it when you hear the details."

"Try me, sir," said Roger, brightening.

"You must first understand that this is confidential. Should there be scandal on it, your head and maybe mine, and sundry others, would pay the price, Master Vambrace."

He leaned forward, staring intently at Roger.

"You know that Frank Drake's in Plymouth, eh? He would sail, but as day creeps after day the wind stays full from the south, and Drake chafes. Doubtless you know of his plans and destination?"

"Not more than another does."

"But you know, I'll warrant, that he goes forth on no such peaceful trading voyage as he'd have the world believe

Nay! He goes to loot Spanish ships and sack Spanish towns along the Main. Eh, is this any secret? First he tells us that he would go to Ireland and help put down the rebels. With victuals enough to endure five months! Or he tells that he will fare for the New Found Land, to seek out a northwestern passage. In December! And when not himself or a one among his men hath heavy enough clothing to keep him warm even in England! Or else he gives it out that he projects no more than a trip of commerce to Alexandria, where he would load his five vessels with currants."

The Lord Treasurer did not quite laugh; but he snorted loudly.

"Currants! Think ye he requires two cartographers and a mass of prick-cards and plot-papers for the finding of Alexandria? Or a tall store of wild-shot, chain-shot, harquebusses, pistolas, corslets, for the loading of currants? And those forty-six cannons and culverins and demi-culverins and sakers—are they to be used, perchance, in the pursuit of merchandise?"

Roger was silent. He knew that Lord Burghley was opposed to the doings of this celebrated sea dog, who carried on his own private war against Spain in the New World, and that Burghley would, if he could, keep Drake in England. But he also knew that Burghley couldn't. The members of the war party were too strong for him, for they had invested in the undertaking. Indeed, rumor had it that the Queen herself was a shareholder to the extent of one thousand crowns.

Drake had slipped away the previous month. But rough seas off the Lizard had forced him back to refit; and now he was windlocked.

"Know ye also," Burghley was saying, "that with the coming of an ambassador from Madrid our England is to resume relations of friendship with Spain, eh? Well, and he hath come, this Don Bernardino de Mendoza. But at the last hour, all unexpectedly, he decreed not to land at Dover, as had been his first intent, but at Plymouth. He's in Plymouth now. He hath been three days there, giving out that he wished to recover his land legs. Eh, but his eyes and ears have been open all that while, be sure of it! To him Drake's a common pirate. And tomorrow he starts up for London."

Roger said, "Oh," thoughtfully.

"Is there need to tell you what this signifies? He will demand an audience with the Queen Majesty instanter, and he will be granted this for she'll not dare to deny it. He will bring loud objection to the Drake enterprise, demanding that it be dissolved. This too the Queen's Majesty will not dare to deny, for that would mean war and England is unready for war. So a royal courtier will be dispatched forthwith to Plymouth, and Drake's ships will be emptied."

Burghley leaned back.

"This will come to pass, Master Vambrace, unless it chance that Don Bernardino doth not get up to London until the winds have changed."

Then he told Roger what he wished him to do.

Roger Vambrace stood for a full minute in silence, thinking about this. Burghley watched him.

Roger said slowly:

"If I fail, or if later I am recognized, or any of my men are recognized—"

"The gallows! It can be naught less. I'll vow perforce, for sound reasons of state, that I never sent to you upon such an errand. And the Queen will cry that's here a villainous highwayman."

Roger nodded.

"I ask it, I do not command," Burghley pointed out. "The Queen's Majesty hath put this duty upon me because, being friendly to the Flemish commerce, and of the peace party, none would suspect a man in my service. I like it not, but her mind is fixed."

Roger said slowly: "I'll accept the undertaking, with all my men, if the

Queen's Majesty herself will give me the command."

The Lord Treasurer nodded. He seemed to have expected this. He rose, and quitted the chamber by a panel door, which he left open behind him, discovering a narrow corridor. Roger heard the far sweet sound of a virginal. Presently this music ceased, and Burghley returned.

"Go in. She's alone."

Five minutes later Roger Vambrace was back, a shade pale and very serious of countenance for one usually so hale and gay. He merely nodded to Lord Burghley, who gave him a key from an olivewood box.

"God be with thee, my boy. I like it not, for methinks I send thee to death. But when the Queen's Majesty hath spoken—"

"Aye," muttered Roger. He bowed impeccably in the doorway. "A good day to you, my lord."

BACK in the barracks he went first to his goshawks. He could not take them upon this journey, for they would betray his station, being valuable birds, survivors of a day more prosperous. One was a haggard, very swift and obedient, matchless in a strike. The other was younger, an eyas, gentle and affectionate as any kitten—except when she was aloft. Roger kept them in satin hoods, and from their legs dangled silken jesses terminating in little silver varvels which bore the Vambrace coat armor.

" 'Twill be lonesome without you," he told them, and fondly stroked their necks. "But if I come not back, dears, ye go as my gift to the royal falconry, and sure there's no greater honor even for such as you, eh?"

He knelt in brief prayer, asking God to protect her gracious majesty, Elizabeth of England, and Beth and Marian, these being the goshawks. When he rose, suddenly laughing, he waved both arms.

"Harness and to horse, lads! At long last we face something more perilous than cards!"

THEY stopped about ten miles outside of Plymouth. It was midnight, and cold, foggy; but the instant Roger gave permission they slipped out of saddle and fell into a ditch, to sleep soundly. They had been riding for fifteen hours without rest, even remaining mounted when they partook hastily of bread and ale at obscure inns. They had been careful to attract no attention to themselves. At the posting stations they had not even claimed the fivepence-a-mile rate allowed those who ride on state business, but had paid sixpence like private gentlemen.

Only Roger Vambrace remained awake, and groggily. Stalking up and down the highway, he reviewed in his mind this curious mission. He had explained it to the others. He had told them—what they already knew—that relations between Spain and England at the moment were delicate, and Spain, much the stronger nation, was angry, demanding. The person of an ambassador is at all times sacred. The person of Don Bernardino de Mendoza, under the present circumstances, should be triply so.

And of course, the kidnaping of even an ordinary traveler was a crime punishable by death.

He had explained that the guard of Queen's men would be small, only five or six. These fellows didn't know who it was who would attack them, but they knew that they should put up only a sham fight—and then turn and gallop away. Don Bernardino would be attended by numerous servants, but it was unlikely that many of these would be armed. Probably he would have several gentlemen with him, and these fellows, and the ambassador himself, represented the greatest danger.

On no account must any harm befall Don Bernardino or any of his friends! No Spaniard must receive so much as a scratch! Roger had prohibited the carrying of pistols, for fear one of his men might forget himself in the excitement and shoot somebody. He himself, however, carried a monstrous, and loaded, dag.

Roger had also the key of a deserted manor house situated on a lonely spit of land extending into the sea, not many miles from where they now waited. This place had been stocked with food. How long they would remain there, with Don Bernardino as their prisoner, they didn't know. A few hours perhaps, or perhaps a few days, even a week. It all depended upon the wind.

When the wind was found to blow full and fair from the north, or from any other direction which would enable Captain Drake to clear his ships from Plymouth harbor, then Drake himself would lead a party of sailors to the deserted manor house, Roger Vambrace and his men would run, and Don Bernardino would be set free. The ambassador, after that, could not possibly get up to London before Drake had cleared the harbor.

Moreover, it was presumed that his objections to the expedition would be less heated by reason of the fact that Drake himself had saved him from the clutches of the highwaymen. The ambassador might suspect that the whole business was an elaborate plot; but what of this? He could prove nothing. And Queen Elizabeth, loud with apologies, simulating indignation, would send a messenger to Plymouth to halt an expedition already upon the high seas.

Of course there would be a hue and cry. All the south of England would be in a hubbub. But Roger could be confident that neither the Queen's own men nor the Devonshire deputy sheriffs would look for the missing ambassador in that deserted manor house by the sea. Only Drake would think of going there, at the proper time.

Roger sighed. True, he had been calling for excitement; but he didn't like this underhanded business—or the risk of being hanged as a common criminal.

It was bitterly cold. When he awakened the men, at the first signs of dawn, they were stiff, numb. They stamped up and down, flapping their arms, beating their hands together. The mist swirled languidly after each, making graceful little whirlpools. The wind was off the sea—if it had been otherwise all this would not be necessary—and it bit angrily at their faces.

He examined them, solemnly reviewed them. Each had a sword and dagger. Each was wrapped in a long cloak, and under that wore simple dark clothing. They had torn the badges, the Vambrace arms, from their left sleeves. Roger himself had made certain that his heraldic martlet, gules on a field argent, was not in evidence upon his own person; he wore no jewelry, and his doublet was an unadorned brown taffeta, his trunk hose plain brown wool.

"Your masks, lads!" Habitually he called them lads, though in fact he was the youngest of the group. "And mark that ye keep them well fastened every moment of the time!"

Each with a piece of black wool fitted over his entire face, they looked very grim and terrible in the early morning fog.

"There's hoofs," Dover Harry announced, "from the west."

Roger cried: "To horse, and get ye down to the next bend to keep watch. Let none see you, if 'tis not the party we await! But if it is, ride back to use instanter. We'll be hid in these bushes."

In concealment, and mounted, he looked carefully to the priming of his dag. For all the weather, he'd been able to keep the match aglow. He thought only to use the weapon as a possible threat.

The morning was very still, the narrow highway deserted. The fog, shoved by a moaning breeze, was restless, thinner. The light of the sun, though broken still, and blurred, was making progress through drear, low clouds.

Roger himself could hear the hoofbeats now. He tightened his mask, loosened his rapier.

Dover Harry came riding back along the side of the road, his horse treading the frozen grasses for the sake of silence. He whispered to nobody in sight:

" 'Tis a great yellow coach-and-eight!"

Roger called softly: "Haste back of those pines. Your blades, lads!

ROGER'S first impression of the party, as it came into sight through the now meagre fog, was one of disappointment. It was much smaller than he had expected. Instead of twenty-five or thirty men, there were scarcely ten. Perhaps this was all the better for him: it would make the task easier less confusing. Nevertheless, there was something strange about it.

Surely the Spanish ambassador, of all persons, would wish to make a display of magnificence. The very fact that he traveled in a coach at all, in this year of Our Lord 1577, was evidence of his pretentiousness. Roger had supposed that Don Bernardino would use the vehicle only to quit Plymouth, to pass through the principal towns on the way, and to enter London, and would ride in saddle the greater part of the journey, that being a more natural and far more comfortable mode of travel.

But he saw nobody who might conceivably be Don Bernardino, and a lackey led two horses by the side of the coach.

A poor procession, Roger thought. There was only a driver, and no footman at all. Most of the attendants seemed shabby, uncouth fellows, and only a few of them wore livery.

This flashed through Roger's mind, and for an instant he hesitated. Then he saw the Mendoza arms emblazoned in many places upon the enameled bardings of one of the led horses, and boldly painted upon the coach doors; and he saw a bisque-faced man with an exquisite black beard and enormous earrings lean out to call something to the driver. He spurred from cover.

"Hi! Hi-*yee!* Unsheath and you're dead men!"

They were only six, but because of the suddenness of their appearance, the boldness of the attack, and the great noise they made, they seemed like many more in that hazy light. Furiously they beat the servants with the flats of their blades. Loudly they called for surrender.

Three men turned and galloped away. The driver of the coach scrambled down and took to his heels. But the rest drew without hesitation; and soon the lonely road sounded like an armorer's shop or a smithy for the clang of steel on steel. A pistol exploded.

"Hi-*yee!* The rest of you, merry lads! This way! This way!"

He signaled to imaginary associates up the road. Three more man spurred away, filled with panic.

Roger made for the coach. The door opened, and two men appeared. One was a giant with a thick blond beard; he carried a pistol; he was roughly dressed, and there were gold rings in his ears. The other was the bisque-faced exquisite, a tall man with cold black eyes, a bloodless mouth, a chin tilted arrogantly.

This fellow was unquestionably the ambassador. His fingers and thumbs were ablaze with rings; the pearl-clusters in his ears and the strings of pearls around his neck were such as any king would be proud to wear; he sniffed unconcernedly at a gold-filigree pomander suspended from a chair of huge gold links which in itself was worth a fortune.

Yes, this was Don Bernardino de

Mendoza, personal representative for His Most Catholic Majesty Philip II, by grace of God King of Castile, King of Leon, King of Aragon, of the Two Sicilies, of Jerusalem, Portugal, Granada, Corsica, Navarre, Toledo, Jean, Algarves, Sardinia, Cordoba, Valencia, Gallicia, Muscia, Gibralta, the Canary Islands, the East and West Indies, and the Isles and Continents of the Ocean—Philip, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy, Duke of Brabant, Duke of Milan, Count of Hapsburgh, Count of Flanders, Count of Tyrol, Count of Barcelona, Lord of Biscay, Lord of Molina, etc., etc., etc.

"Your arms," Roger cried, "or you die."

The blond giant swung upon Don Bernardino, raising the pistol. Roger saw that the watch was lighted, the striker cocked, and he realized with a gasp that the giant was going to shoot not him but the ambassador.

He was about ten feet away. He had his sword in his right fist, his pistol in the left. He threw the pistol.

It struck the giant's pistol, which exploded at that instant. The ball ripped a groove of splinters from the side of the coach, smashing the bright varnish like a mirror. It must have missed the bisque-faced man by less than the thickness of his hand; yet that man did not stir.

Roger dismounted, ran toward the coach. He couldn't understand this, but he knew that whatever happened the person of Don Bernardino must suffer no injury. The giant drew, swung upon him with a curse undeniably foreign yet seemingly not Spanish. But Roger had no time for further thought.

Instinct prompted him to fight. But even in that amazing moment he did not forget his orders. He tried to keep the giant away, to disarm him without hurting him.

This was not easy. The giant, his face red with fury, charged on, slashing wildly. Roger might easily have run him through, but to trick the sword from his fist was far more difficult. He retreated, his own blade licking in and out, threatening, but meeting with no response from this blind, mad, bellowing bull.

Roger slipped into a low guard, dropped to one knee, made a perfect *stoccata*, slithering under the giant's blade and bringing his point within an inch of the giant's nose. It didn't frighten the fellow a bit, though it should have been apparent to any adversary that Roger could have run him through either eye had he wished to do so. But the giant charged one. Roger, exasperated, stepped back—stepped upon a round stone.

For a fleet instant he lost his balance. The giant's blade shished past his left shoulder, leaving a sudden, intense burn. The giant raised it for another and more accurate stroke. Roger now had no choice. He couldn't retreat because he was too close, and because his balance was imperfect. Deliberately, if regretfully, he ran the giant through the right shoulder.

This had happened very quickly. Pistol smoke still was mingling with the milky ribbands of fog. Dover Harry and Andrew were pursuing four horsemen down the road toward Plymouth. Fat John was seated upon a stone, holding his right hand over a gunshot wound in his shoulder, and groaning. Bones John and Walter were hurrying toward their captain.

"It was very pretty swordsmanship," drawled Don Bernardino de Mendoza, negligently sniffing at his pomander.

Roger glared at him. Already he disliked this man intensely.

"Pretty! Why, the hulking fool—" He shook his head. "So that's the Euclidian Spanish rapier play I've heard so much about, eh?"

"Spanish?" Don Bernardino raised his perfectly plucked eyebrows. "Nay, but why think ye the brute's a Spaniard?

'Tis no flattery to my race, highwayman."

Puzzled, Roger bent over the giant. The fellow was alive, though his eyes were closed. His wound was not a serious one. Probably he was unconscious only from shock—the wind had been knocked out of him by the violence of his fall. Spaniard? No, certainly he was not that.

Bones John and Walter had reached his side.

"Angels of grace!" cried Walter. "That's Van Boomstaat!"

Roger leaned against the coach. He was a little dizzy, not from the fighting but because of this whirl of events. He saw Dover Harry and Walter returning at a casual canter. He saw Don Bernardino flick a speck of dust from his doublet of turquoise Genoa velvet.

"Nay, I know not the scoundrel's name," Don Bernardino said as he climbed back into the coach, "but by all the saints, I'm a-weary of highwaymen and cutthroats! Even in this land of barbarians, methinks, 'tis an overdose when a traveler is held up twice within the hour. Be assured," he added, leaning out of the coach window, "that you will all hang for it."

THE DUTCHMAN stirred. Van Boomstaat! There was no more notorious pirate! He was a leader of that band loosely designated as the Beggars of the Sea, sailors without a country, Dutchmen and Huguenots who couldn't go home. A brotherhood of hate and desperation. In the case of the Dutchmen, Spaniards were the unforgivable enemy. Spaniards who had made the Netherlands an abattoir. Spaniards who, under Philip's lieutenant, the Duke of Alva, had governed with unparalleled cruelty and violence.

Van Boomstaat, like too many of his fellow outlaws, had watched his family cut away behind him. His father and mother, his two sisters and his wife, all had been slaughtered at the command of Alva. Since then Van Boomstaat, ranging the narrow seas, had shown no mercy to Spaniards.

Like the other Beggars he was careful not to attack English ships, however, and for this reason, and because of religious sympathies, these pirates were sometimes permitted to take temporary refuge in English ports, to restock and refit, to water their vessels, purchase gunpowder. Spain complained angrily, and Elizabeth issued orders, but the Beggars nevertheless continued to appear from time to time at Gravesend, Dover, Falmouth, Plymouth.

But none of them ever had gone far from his ship. Was Van Boomstaat's vessel at Plymouth now? Had Van Boomstaat left his deck to turn highwayman—on an English road?

Then Roger remembered that Bernardino Mendoza was a cousin of the Duke of Alva. And immensely rich.

Roger leaned into the coach.

"Now tell me, this man attacked you? He is not of your party?

Mendoza's features were congealed with arrogance, as though with some colorless paste. He did not even trouble himself to turn.

"Nay, clod, and do you think he looks like a man one of my blood would choose as a coach companion?"

"I am no clod, sirrah!"

Mendoza sniffed at his pomander.

"Doubtless I do your English peasants great hurt by that. I should not class them with masked robbers."

Roger had forgotten the mask. He thumped the windowsill.

"This man kidnaped you! Did he say where he was going to take you, what he was going to do with you?"

For a moment the ambassador did not deign to reply. Then he murmured: "He pointed a pistola at my head and swore that if I showed resistance he would murder me. Surely I had no thought of blows with such swine! And my retain-

ers had fled. What's more, the gallant guardsmen sent me by her Majesty Elizabeth—these fled also, like great cowards, without striking a true blow."

Roger thought: Of course they had fled! They had been expecting an attack, and in the fog they didn't stop to distinguish the nationality of their assailants. The deed had been made very easy for Van Boomstaat.

"The fellow's French was such that I could scarce comprehend it," Don Bernardino drawled, "but he blubbered something about taking me to a place along the coast and there transferring me into his vessel."

Andrew cried:

"He gets up!"

The blond pirate had risen, and stood swaying. Suddenly, with unexpected liveliness, he flung himself upon a horse and raced down the road toward Plymouth.

"Shall I after him?"

Roger shook his head.

"Nay. He's fresh mounted and our steeds are weary. I make no doubt his men are waiting nearby." He leaned into the coach again. "Were any of your retainers killed?"

The ambassador shrugged.

"Four or five. I could not be certain. I paid little heed to the brawling."

Roger groaned, withdrew. Now, no matter what occurred, he would be blamed. Now the kidnaping was unforgivable, unexplainable. He was tempted to flee with all his men. But Fat John was wounded, his shoulder broken. Besides, they would not be safe anywhere in England. It was best to carry through the original plan.

"Wouldst travel in the coach, John?"

Fat John had lost a lot of blood. His wound had been bandaged, but his face was white as death and wet with sweat. He merely glanced into the vehicle, and withdrew, wrinkling his nose.

"Ride with that perfumed popinjay? Nay, I'll go in saddle!"

Half an hour later they turned into a country lane. The fog had lifted. The breeze was stiffer off the sea, and sharp with the scent of brine. They moved slowly, a cumbrous procession consisting of a Spanish grandee, two led horses, six masked men, three of them slightly wounded and one with a broken shoulder, and a splendid, glittering coach-and-eight.

Weeds cluttered the approach. The house, half-way out on a bleak sandbar in the center of a forgotten bay, was a square, lugubrious structure crazily compounded of slats, stucco, and bricks arranged in herringbone pattern, with narrow blank windows, and many broken chimneys. In front was a dry fountain, centering a sad, neglected park. The wind moaned ghoulishly through the pines and leafless oaks.

The coach jolted to an exhaling, grateful stop. The horses, lost to all sense of grandeur, began to nose among the weeds, not too optimistically. Roger Vambrace dismounted, drew his pistol, stared thoughtfully at the house. He had been assured that the place would be deserted—but the front door was wide open.

"Andrew, you and Bones John come with me. The rest remain here."

On foot, slowly, they moved toward the place. The front door had been broken open—that was obvious. It could have afforded but little resistance, for it was an ancient portal, and its rusty lock sagged in discouraged fashion. They entered a huge hall, unfurnished and very dim, the floor thick with dust. On the right they heard a curious scuffling sound. Roger cocked the pistol, stalked across the hall, and went into a large, high-ceiled dining chamber. He stopped. Bones John and Andrew, immediately behind him, stopped at the same instant; and he heard them gasp.

"Faith of my faith," Andrew muttered. " 'Tis a ghost!"

Roger himself thought so, for a mo-

ment. But he didn't move. He stood with feet spread, watching a great wavering shadow.

The thing was full seven feet tall, and very broad. Dark, uncertain of outline, it swayed back and forth. It was making that scuffling sound on the floor, and this fact, more than any other, reassured Roger, for ghosts make no noise with their feet.

Somebody unseen in the deeper shadows of a corner whined: "Pray spare us, good my lords! It'll do ye no harm, I swear it!"

Roger took a step forward. The monstrous shadow appeared to collapse. It became a third its height. But the scuffling was louder now.

THEN Roger began to laugh. For as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he saw that this was a bear. An uncommonly large bear, shuffling back and forth in the center of the room. A shabby bear, for all its impressive size, with brown coat sadly moulted, spotchy, mangy. On its four feet, it blinked up at Roger for a moment with tiny red eyes, then turned away as though in disgust, ambled to a corner, dropped upon the floor with a dull thump, and went to sleep.

"Pray be merciful, my worships! 'Tis no more than that we were benighted, and lost from a wrong turn, and we found ourselves—"

Roger called:

"Come out of there! Come out where I can see you!"

A small fellow in yellow homespun, very dirty, emerged trembling from a corner. He looked an Italian. There were little brass bells in his ears, upon his head a felt cap. He was badly frightened.

"Please, my lords, we were benighted and lost, and we came—"

"Strollers, eh?" Roger was trying to seem stern. "Know ye not the law about those who break into the private homes of gentlemen?"

"Worshipful my lords, we were—'

"There must be others. You scoundrels never travel alone, I wot! Where are they, eh? *Speak,* you fool!"

"Nay, I know not! When we heard you coming the others offed it in haste. But my Bruno would never be budged, being nine parts of slumber."

"I'll fetch them!'

Roger went back to the entrance hall. He shouted loudly, raising a multitude of scared echoes which chased themselves back and forth through the remote recesses of the mansion.

"Come forth, strollers! Come forth, else I'll send my men after you with swords and cudgels!"

One by one, quaking, big-eyed with fear, they came—down the grand staircase, out of the kitchen, out of dim closets and hallways. There was a midget with a bright red turban wrapped around his head, and impish, alert, intelligent eyes. There was a man with a lute, one with a rebec, one who carried a long and rusty sackbut. There was a hulking, sullen-eyed fellow with a tattered tome he probably couldn't read—a false scholar, Roger placed him, who walked the highways begging for alms on the pretense that he wished to finish his studies at one of the universities.

"Abraham-men, eh?"

They all started to protest at once. Roger waved them to silence, frowning ferociously.

"Strollers! Beggars, I wot! Like as not lift purses when there's an opportunity, eh?"

The little man with the turban cried:

"Nay, good m'lord, these are practitioners of the fine arts you see before you. Now if your worship would deign to witness an exhibition—"

From somewhere about his fusty person incredibly he had produced six small glass balls, and he started to juggle these. Even in that dim place they

flashed bewilderingly. He threw them high, he threw them low, he threw them up from under his knees, he threw them behind his back.

Roger roared:

"Stop that!"

The little fellow ceased instantly, and the balls disappeared as though by magic. With extraordinary nimbleness, his feet making only a faint thud as he landed, he performed a backflip. He spread his palms.

"Or mayhap your worship would prefer—"

He started to do cartwheels, without quitting his place in front of Roger. His tiny body whirled around and around, his scarlet turban flashing almost with the speed of the glass balls a moment earlier.

"Stop it, I tell you! It makes me dizzy!"

"That it doth truly, my lord. But the quickness of the eye is such, in your true artist like me, that whensoever it seemeth to—"

Roger turned on his heel to hide a laugh. He stalked back to the entrance hall. There he found three sacks of food and a keg of ale. He smiled when he noticed that these were obviously ship's stores—hard bread, salted hams and fishes. It was not difficult to guess where they'd come from. One was open, half empty.

"So you've been at your thievery already, eh?"

"Good my lord, there's that about the belly of an artist—"

"Be silent!"

"Yes, m'lord.'

He went outside. The others followed him uncertainly. But in truth, Roger himself was uncertain. The smile disappeared from his mouth when he saw the tall, stiff figure of Don Bernardino de Mendoza, and when he saw Mendoza's cold eyes. How he hated that man! He ordered the horses unharnessed and freed: they must keep themselves warm, for the stable in back was a ruins and open on all sides to the air. Gruffly he asked the Spanish ambassador to go inside—and he glowered after the man.

Bones John whispered: "What shall we do with these vagabonds?"

"We must keep them here, for that they've seen the coach."

"The hue and cry will have been raised anyway by the Spaniard's servants who escaped."

"Aye, but none knows we are here—none who shouldn't know. But if the strollers went babbling to a market cross of what they had seen and where they'd seen it, any deputy sheriff would be obliged to come for his own look. Eh, and then what, for us?"

Bones John shrugged. He loosened his mask, took it off for a few minutes now that Don Bernardino was no longer in sight. The masks were becoming irksome.

Roger had them haul the coach around to the rear of the house, where it would not be visible to anybody coming up the lane from the highway. The fact that the strolling minstrels had stumbled upon this place made him realize that others might do the same. Ordinary travelers could be chased away; but if they had seen the great coach, flaunting the Mendoza arms, they would have a tale to tell in the next village. All England, Roger thought grimly, soon would be seeking that coach.

It was as they were returning to the front of the house, after concealing the coach, that they saw one of the minstrels make a dash for the lane. It was the sackbut player, and he hugged his long instrument to him as he ran.

"Hi!" Roger started after him. "Catch him! He mustn't get away!"

The fellow ran the harder. Like his companions, excepting the little imp in the turban, he had been paralyzed with fright by the masks. Unlike the rest, he now had recovered the use of his limbs.

"Stop!"

Roger dashed around a curve in the lane—and heeled to a sudden stop. The minstrel too had stopped, a few yards ahead of him.

The minstrel, poor, luckless man, must have thought that his evil day certainly had come. Behind him were highwaymen. Ahead, galloping down the lane with their swords bare were a dozen or more wild-eyed Dutchmen.

There was a shot, a terrific explosion. The minstrel caved in the middle as though struck by a great club, and sat down. He toppled over dead.

ROGER'S pistol roared, and the nearest Dutchman slid limp as a rag from his horse. The others reined vigorously, cursing. But they hesitated only for a moment; and then Van Boomstaat crowded to the fore, bellowing, and they charged again.

The moment was enough for Roger. He had turned, was running back toward the house, chasing Andrew and Bones John and Dover Harry and Walter ahead of him.

They took a stand on the steps leading up to the gaping front doorway. There were eight steps, and they were wide, admitting of three men abreast with ample room for swordplay. Roger and Bones John and Andrew stood in front, the others were behind them. Even Fat John, in an agony of pain, managed to draw with his good arm and to post himself in the second line.

Roger was laughing again. Here was a fight! Here was no sneaking, underhanded business of sham assaults, sham defense.

The Beggars of the Sea dismounted, half falling from their horses, like men unused to the saddle. But they did not pause. Screaming, they dashed to the steps.

For a minute, two minutes, the fight was fast and noisy, and confusing. But though there were fully a dozen of the pirates, they could make the assault only three abreast. And though they carried heavier, shorter blades which might have been effective on a crowded deck, they were no match for the three cool rapier masters who met them.

Two of them tumbled promptly. Roger disarmed one and sent him backward with a hard, choppy head blow. Andrew ran one neatly through the neck.

Bones John slipped, was out in the leg. Walter stepped forward, his blade ready; but Bones John was on his feet again, yelling defiance.

Van Boomstaat, who alone among the Beggars was armed with a rapier—he had taken it from Don Bernardino—thundered a command to retreat. The Dutchmen backed away, dazed, angry.

"Give us that Papist," cried Van Boomstaat, his face almost purple with rage, "or we'll slice you like pigs!"

Roger smiled behind his mask. He shifted his sword to his left hand, and raised his right hand to his face, placing the thumb firmly against the nose.

"Is that your answer?"

Roger delightedly waggled his fingers. Andrew and Bones John and the others were making the same gesture.

A volcanic roar burst from the pirate chief. "Like pigs!" He ran for the steps again, his rapier brandished high. "I said like pigs!" He reached the third step in one great bound. He didn't even seem to know that his left cheek had been laid open and his left thigh pierced before he brought down his first blow. His weapon crashed through Andrew's guard—and Andrew crumbled, tipped forward, and rolled to the ground, step by step, trailing blood.

Walter stepped forward to take his place. Then Walter backed, feigning fright. The pirate sprang up two steps and raised his blade—and Walter laid open his right arm from elbow to shoulder. The pirate, a look of blank astonishment on his face, fell back.

Because the Dutchmen were lower, it was easier to cut their faces and heads than their bodies. Roger Vambrace, rapier in one hand, dagger in the other, put two of them to flight with bloody cheeks and foreheads. A third seemed about to prove as easy—when a rotten board grated under Roger's foot, and he was pitched forward. He succeeded at least in falling inside of the Dutchman's wild cut, and the two of them thudded to the ground below. Roger rolled swiftly, and got up on one knee, shortening his sword. He was too late. The Dutchman, ignoring him, had bounded up the steps, had run Fat John through the belly when that veteran, stiff with pain, tried to block him, and had raced inside the house. Roger went after him.

The Dutchman found seven men and a bear in the great dining hall. The bear was asleep, indifferent to battle. Six of the men, apparently strolling minstrels, were crouched in a corner, praying and weeping in fright. The seventh was the one the Dutchman had come for.

Don Bernardino de Mendoza was a fatalist, and a Spanish gentleman to boot. He would not run, or cringe; and weaponless as he was, it would be senseless for him to try resistance. He stood by one of the windows, with scorn the only expression in his black eyes, his hard mouth.

Van Boomstaat had said:

"If we can't take him alive, kill him! We would kill him anyway, after we got the ransom!"

The Dutch sailor, then, knew his duty. He advanced upon Mendoza with his cutlass held high, and a sweaty grin slobbering his lips. Mendoza didn't move.

"Alva's kin, eh? Remember that fiend when I—"

Incredibly the thin young highwayman with the long blade was in front of him. He closed his eyes an instant, shook his head. He couldn't understand this. But if he must kill an Englishman first, in order to kill a Spaniard— He jumped, aiming a blow at the highwayman's head. But he jumped full upon the highwayman's rapier, which slipped into his heart.

Roger withdrew the blade with a jerk.

Mendoza remarked:

"It is curious that varlets in this barbarous land should be so clever with the rapier."

Roger was not one who listened meekly when men insulted him. Rage churned in his breast now, rose into his throat, seemed to be choking him like a hot gag.

"Nay, for that you'll answer to me in the field!"

"You address Mendoza, my dear criminal. Mendoza does not engage with highway robbers."

Roger ran outside. The Dutchmen were backing across the park, around the fountain. Roger flew among them like a madman, cutting and thrusting right and left, cursing, screaming. They broke and ran.

FOR all the season, that day was very long. The sun came out about noon, but it was thin and pale, worried-looking, and soon it crawled back behind a cloud and was not seen again. The air grew a little milder. The weathervane atop the stable—the only useful thing about that rotting, rickety structure—pointed persistently south.

Captain Roger Vambrace had organized his following like any commander of a besieged fortress. The Dutchmen had not reappeared, but there was evidence that they lurked among the pines around the first bend of the lane. If the builder of this manor house, whoever he was, had been inspired by tales of feudal warfare, he could not have selected a better defensive site.

The Dutchmen, even to get into the park, would be obliged to cross a strip of sand without any cover but two pine

trees—a strip of sand not more than fifteen feet wide. Three or four determined men could hold them there. But a second line was the house itself. The eight steps leading to the front door were steep and wide. To get behind the house, back by the stable, the pirates would have to tread a soggy, marshy lane on the right; on the left the side of the house itself was flush with the shore.

Even if they got back there, surrounded the place, their advantage would be slight. The back windows, like the front ones, were high and narrow, and the back door was firm, well bolted.

Four Dutchmen had not retreated. Three were dead; the fourth, badly wounded, refused to say anything. Fat John was dead. Andrew too. And not a one of the others, Roger himself included, but had suffered some sort of wound.

Yet Roger kept them busy. Don Bernardino, listless, scornful, had retired to a room on the second story, where he had found a comfortable chair, and he sat there sniffing his pomander, disdainfully refusing offers of food. But the others had work to do. Roger kept at least two of his own attendants at the end of the lane, always with naked blades. The third was permitted to sleep. The vagabonds were made to search the mansion thoroughly, and they found two grimy crossbows, three dozen dull heavy quarrels, a couple of pikes, a billhook, two pitchforks, an axe, and some boards suitable for use as clubs. Roger had reloaded his own pistol, and Bones John had found another pistol and some powder and ball upon one of the corpses. To make a sort of barrier, an early obstruction in case of a charge from the lane, the two pine trees were felled in such a way that they stretched across the narrowest part of the sandbar. Roger assigned this task to the musicians—the hardest work they'd done, he guessed, in many months.

The bearwarden was too frightened to be of much assistance; the false scholar was surly, slow; but the midget was everywhere, cheerfully finding things, pointing out things—he had wondrously sharp eyes, and remained cool, so that he made a good sentinel.

Roger was afraid of a rush when night came. He permitted himself a few hours of sleep in the afternoon, but he was walking about, examining things, checking things, long before sundown.

The open ocean was not visible, even from the tip of the sandbar—an arm of land blocked it—so that a signal to a passing ship, assuming that some ship did pass, was not possible. That is, it was not possible unless—

"Think ye not we would burn the table, good m'lord? The wind's not strong off the sea now, and methinks the sparks would not fly to the house. But the blaze could be seen for many miles."

It was the midget, unaccountably at Roger's elbow. His beady eyes were upturned in question. But Roger shook his head.

The imp persisted:

"It might fetch a sheriff's band."

"That," said Roger grimly, "is why we'll not do it."

"Ah," said the imp.

There was some silence. After a time the imp said casually:

"You glance often toward that weathervane, good m'lord."

"You see too much. Stick to your balls, juggler."

"Ah, now that'll I'll do right merrily, good sir. For see"—He had them out, and was moving them brilliantly in the light of the dying sun—"there's always his art to soothe the soul of the artist. Ah, sir! you are an artist with the rapier, for I have seen you fight, and so you will understand me! Now I make this ball disappear—"

"You talk too much."

—"And lo, another comes into its place! And another! Now whence come these, and whence do they go?" He

had stopped juggling the balls of glass and was making them appear and disappear in an apparently unmoving palm. "Another, sirrah! Still another! And—But stay, what's here? Why, 'tis your own dagger, good m'lord! By all the saints, how ever did *that* come among my tossers?"

Laughing, Roger took it away from him.

"Nay, I know not. I felt nothing that you stole it. But then, I'd said when I saw you first that here was a very pickpocket, eh?"

"An artist, good my lord! No pickpocket, but a true artist!"

"Artist or not, get ye out to the felled pines with that pike, and relieve Walter. He merits sleep, that lad. Two hours of it. Begone!"

The sun, as Roger walked back to the house, was setting upon a weathervane inexorably pointing south.

FOR one thing Roger was thankful. The Spanish ambassador, who must at all costs be kept unscratched, had elected to remain aloof and in seclusion, upstairs. Roger was without experience in controlling his temper, and the very thought of that high-chinned fellow made him tingle with rage. He did not blame Mendoza for refusing to fight him. In the Spaniard's eyes he was a mere criminal, a highwayman, adroit with his rapier perhaps but no meet opponent in the field for a grandee of Philip's proud court. But Roger longed to tear off the hateful mask, and to tell the ambassador who he was. Mendoza would not dare to spurn a Vambrace's challenge!

But this was foolishness, a ruffler's fury. Mendoza must not be hurt. And surely Roger, if he valued his life and honor, and the lives and honor of his attendants, must not reveal to Mendoza his identity.

When he prayed that night, alone in the kitchen, it was for the safety and long life of the blessed Queen, for the welfare of Beth and Marian—Were they contented in the care of a strange falconer?—for the souls of Fat John and Andrew, for strength to resist his impulse to kill Don Bernardino de Mendoza, and for a change of wind.

The sound of a shot brought him to his feet. He ran out of the house, across the park, and found Dover Harry waving a smoking pistol to cool the barrel. Bones John and the midget were nearby, squinting into the dark beyond the felled pines.

"Somebody was moving there. The midget saw him first, then John and I. Saw steel. So I fired to affright them."

Roger nodded. The lane showed nothing now. The whole world seemed utterly still. He saw that Harry and Bones John were drooping with weariness, and he told them to remain only a little while longer, and then he would relieve them. He wished to complete his prayers.

He hurried back to the house, went again into the kitchen, and fell to his knees in a prayer for the souls of the three dead Dutchmen.

Then he relieved Bones John and Dover Harry.

"Sleep near the door, with your blades out. There's no need for waking Walter. The pickpocket and I will keep the watch."

"Nay, no pickpocket, good m'lord! If it please your worship—"

"Sh-sh! We're here to watch, not to jabber of roadside tricks!"

Nevertheless, the little fellow was immensely entertaining throughout that vigil. His name, he disclosed, was Mite Wilson. He was not certain whether "Mite" was a real name or a nickname. He'd never known his parents, or any relatives. He prattled in a low voice of his wanderings in all parts of the kingdom, in the Low Countries too. He had wormed his way into many high households—if he could be believed—and had

performed before many illustrious personages.

"Some day," he boasted, but a shade wistfully, staring out into the darkness, "some day, m'lord, I shall juggle my balls before the Queen's Majesty herself. They tell me she hath a fondness for true art."

"You'll hang from a country gallows before that," grunted Roger.

Yet he hoped that this would not come to pass. He liked the midget, had liked him from the beginning.

Mite Wilson, who seemed to have half the small objects in Devonshire hidden somewhere about his person, presently produced a pack of cards, and with these he did many astonishing, mystifying tricks. But all the while he was watchful. His voice never became loud, and never for long was his gaze taken from the dark of the lane-end. A curious little fellow, he seemed to have the instincts of a watchdog, to *feel* rather than to see or hear signs of danger. And when, toward dawn, he stiffened and was silent, Roger watched him anxiously. Roger himself knew no other reason for alarm.

"What ails you, pickpocket?"

"Nay, I know not, good m'lord. Something's amiss . . . but I do not know what it can be."

"Surely there's naught afoot out there?"

"Nay, not there. But something's amiss. . . . Good m'lord, may I go nosing and learn what it is?"

"Well enough. So that ye go not to sleep but return soon."

"Oh, I'll return!"

He scampered off, a ludicrous little figure of a man, toting a pike twice as tall as himself and almost as heavy.

Roger Vambrace waited, wondering. He looked to the priming of his dag, fastened his mask upon his face again. All desire to sleep had gone out of him, and he was nervously alert. Yet he did not see the midget return, and he jumped a little when the voice came at his very elbow.

"Good m'lord, there are three boats loaded with armed men, coming across the bay!"

Roger pushed him toward the house.

"Awaken everybody, but Harry and Bones John and Walter first. Send those three to me here. Tell the others to be in readiness for attack, but to remain inside the house till they're summoned."

"They'll remain even then," said Mite Wilson.

With Walter, leaving the other two soldiers at the barrier, Roger encircled the house. There was no moon, and the stars were few, but the sky was paling into dawn and the bay was not altogether dark. Three boats, as the midget had said. Six or seven men in each. Roger and Walter, concealed by a corner of the stable, could distinguish their swords and muskets. They rowed very slowly, bent upon silence.

Roger waited until they were within fifty feet of the shore, and then he fired directly into the nearest boat.

There was a squeal of pain, a loud grunt, a splash. The boat stopped, and the others stopped behind it. Roger and Walter could hear whispers. Roger hastily reloaded the dag, and fired again.

The boats were turned about, and they made for the entrance of the bay.

"From both sides, eh? I tell you, Walter, my Lord Treasurer must be forgiven those months of idle peace, when he thrusts us into such a place!"

The house was fully awake now, but for some time there was no further sign of the Dutchmen. Then a small boat appeared at the entrance of the bay. It did not come within pistol-shot. Two men in its bow were sounding with leadlines. The boat after a time disappeared; and when the dawn was well smeared across the heavens, a pinnace poked her nose into that silent bay.

She was about thirty-eight feet overall, half-decked, very slight of beam,

low; she looked fast. There was a mainsail, partly furled, and a fully furled lateen; but four sweeps a side propelled the craft. She came slowly, ominously.

"A Dutcher," Walter pronounced. He had once sailed the narrow seas—indeed, Roger suspected that he'd done a bit of pirating in his time. "She'd carry twenty men, maybe more."

"Guns?"

"I make out a brace of perier slings forward. Iron pieces. Two-pounders, likely, or two and a half. They throw stone-shot."

The pinnace remained at a safe distance. An anchor chain rattled, and the sweeps were withdrawn. Roger observed that she was so placed that a ball shot from her, should it miss the house, or go over the house, would not carry in the direction of the lane. The three small boats trailed her as tenders.

Mite Wilson came on the run, did a handspring.

"Good my lord, they call for you by the barrier!"

Bones John and Dover Harry reported a voice beyond the bend, a voice calling for the leader of the Englishmen. Nobody was in sight.

John yelled:

"Have out your message, Beggars! He's here!"

The voice came clear enough. A deep, booming voice, a Low Country accent, but the words were pronounced slowly and with care.

"The worshipful Captain Otto Van Boomstaat calls upon the chief of the highwaymen to give up his Spanish prisoner. An he does this, he nor any of his men shall be harmed. An he doth not, we will open fire upon him from the sea, and show no quarter in assault."

Roger smiled a tight smile. His men were looking at him; but they might have guessed the answer; for had not the Queen's Majesty herself, flashing eyes and black teeth under that extraordinary wig of red, commanded that the person of Don Bernardino be kept from injury?

Roger cupped his hands:

"Inform the worshipful captain that my answer is the same—excepting that this time it shall be done with both hands, sirrah!"

THERE must have been some signal system between shore and pinnace, for the first gun spoke not fifteen minutes after this colloquy. The ball, or stone, tore through the top of the tiny stable tower, filling the air with rotten splinters. Roger, who had been indoors at the time, hurried to the back of the house to find that the weathervane had been shot away, and, idiotically still upright, now reposed upon the roof of Don Bernardino's glittering coach.

Another shot came soon after. It was lower, and ripped through the stable, which offered no real resistance to it. The shot missed a corner of the house by scant inches and buried itself with a squodgy plop into the far shore of the bay.

Don Bernardino called from an upstairs window:

"Another kidnaping, my dear criminal?"

Roger did not answer. He did not trust himself to speak to the ambassador again.

Four more shots were fired, with solider results. One scraped the roof, but each of the others tore into the house itself. One passed through both sides of Don Bernardino's coach, leaving neat holes, before it reached the house.

The musicians, the bearwarden and the false scholar had taken refuge in the wine cellar. Mite Wilson scurried back and forth, from front to back, from back to front, and in and out of the house repeatedly, with messages and information. He was entirely cool. He even paused occasionally to perform a backflip or a split, and much of the time

he was singing a bawdy song under his breath.

Roger, whose chief concern was that the ambassador would be struck, kept only one man in the rear as a watch, and stationed the others in front, for it was from the front that the attack would come, he thought.

Once Roger went half way up the grand staircase. His face was grim, his mouth tight; his eyes were almost closed.

He called:

"The wine cellar is the safest place."

"Then run there and hide, my dear criminal."

"But the wine cellar would be safer than up there!"

He waited for a little while, but there was no answer to this second appeal. He went downstairs again.

For almost an hour there was no further shooting. Roger at first supposed that the pirates were merely permitting their perier barrels to cool. Then, after a time, he realized that they were waiting for him to surrender. They were confident that the breathless silence would do more to batter the courage of himself or his men than the very banging of the guns. They expected to see Don Bernardino start down that lane at any moment.

Well, they'd be disappointed! The suspense was horrible, but there were no steadier soldiers anywhere than Walter and Bones John and Dover Harry. And even the midget, grotesque little fellow though he was, and certainly useless in a real battle, showed no trace of panic, but hummed and warbled his way here and there as though this were Coronation Day on a village green with business of the best and good wine flowing free.

Boom! The kitchen door showed a sudden hole, jagged at the edges, and the kitchen floor became thick with wood splinters. *Boom!* A chimney seemed to dissolve—but a moment later the bricks were rattling upon the roof or splashing one by one into the water of the bay.

There was a pause for reloading. Roger started outside, to join the two men at the barrier. Mite Wilson skipped eagerly at his elbow.

Boom!

Roger stopped, jerked his head up.

"That was close," he muttered.

From the house came a strange sobbing sound, high and shrill, a broken squeal of pain. He frowned, puzzled. Even the imp, with his ageless, shrewd face, appeared to be mystified.

Then the explanation came to both of them at once. The bear!

Roger spun about, raced for the house. When he burst into the entrance hall he saw a curious and terrifying sight.

The latest shot from the pinnace had been a lucky one. It had passed directly into a rear window, whistled through the kitchen, shredded off a corner of a door jamb, ricocheted upon the floor of the common room, and skipped clear across the dining room, to bury itself into the panelling on the far side of that great chamber. Just before it had come to rest it had torn a groove of hide from the back of the sleeping Bruno.

For all this time the bear had been asleep. What to it were cannonading and the running-about of stupid men? However, when the shot scraped it, hot and lacerating, Bruno awoke in a rage. Now it was not the tame bear of the market-place, a creature to walk about waving its forepaws, keeping time to the melodies of treble viols, bringing coppers to the hat of its master.

Now it was again a beast of the deep forest, instinct with the hatred of humankind, a thing made mad by pain. Blind and unreasoning, it had gone into the entrance hall, had stumbled upon the bottom step of the grand staircase, had started up.

It was half-way up the stairs when Roger entered the house below. And at the head of the staircase, his face for once showing some expression, his eyes huge in amazement and perhaps even in

fear, stood Don Bernardino de Mendoza. He had come from his room to learn, like Roger, the reason for those curious noises.

The bear saw him. Mendoza this time did not stand cold and fearless. Instead he ran. The bear ran after him.

And Roger ran after the bear.

Roger didn't have his pistol. Both pistols, at his command, were kept at the barrier in anticipation of a charge down the lane. He had only his sword and dagger. These weapons were out by the time he had reached the head of the stairs.

Mendoza had jumped into an empty bedchamber, was trying to close and lock the rusty-hinged door. Bruno rose upon his hind legs, fell against the door before the ambassador could shoot the bolt. The door was flung open, whamming back against the wall, and Mendoza was hurled upon his back in the middle of the room. Bruno waddled toward him, preparing to fall upon him. Bruno's little eyes were red with rage; its forepaws waved wildly, seeking something to rend.

The rapier went in, came out. Bruno turned. The rapier went in again, came out again; and Roger sprang back. He wasn't quite quick enough. One swipe of the left forepaw sent the rapier spinning from his hand, and it clanged against the wall on the far side of the chamber. Bruno, nine hundred pounds of blood and saliva and bunched muscle, thudded forward with amazing speed. Roger sprang further back, slashing with his dagger. It caught and tore a forepaw. The other forepaw shot out. Roger ducked. The blow was a glancing one because of his movement, but it felt to him like the stroke of a sandbag. He crashed to the floor, and the room rocked, and black and red specks did an insane reel before his eyes. Dimly, as though through a pinkish haze, he saw the beast shuffle toward him; but he was too weak, too dizzy, to stir.

Then Bruno dropped—but sideways. And Bruno was still.

ROGER VAMBRACE rose very slowly, very carefully, for the room still rocked like the deck of a ship, and sometimes it moved back and forth in choppy arcs. He approached the bear from behind, gingerly prodded it, examined it.

Yes, it was dead. One of the sword thrusts must have found the heart, and nothing but the tremendous vitality of the beast enraged by pain had carried it so far.

"Even the animals in this swines' homeland assault me."

Don Bernardino de Mendoza was on his feet, cool and assured again, brushing dust from his turquoise doublet. Unless perchance his buttocks had been bruised in the fall, he was unhurt.

"D'ye suppose the bear too had turned kidnaper, eh, my criminal?"

Roger stood with his feet widespread, waiting for his head to clear, trying to control his tongue. In back, the perier spoke again. *Boom!* The house shuddered, and there was a screech of agonized woodwork.

Roger said carefully:

"No man has ever called me a criminal and a churl and a varlet, and then refused to face me in the field."

The Spaniard shrugged.

"A Mendoza does not engage with masked highwaymen."

"Nay, you know full well I'm no highwayman! I'm of blood as old as yours!"

Now the Spaniard smiled slowly—a thin, chilly smile.

"As to the blood, I cannot know. But I'd suspected that roadwork was not your customary vocation."

"'Tis unlikely we'll either come out of this alive," Roger said bluntly. "They will rush us from both sides at any moment now, and fight as we may the place will fall. Three times, my fine grandee, I have saved your life, and I'm

as sick of that as you are of being kidnaped. Now, was I to prove to you that my blood is gentle—"

He paused.

The Spaniard, his eyes narrow slits of blackness, nodded.

"Were you to prove that, then methinks it likely I would enjoy cutting you to ribbands."

"Good!" Roger clapped one hand upon the purse at his belt, where he carried his signet rings and other articles of jewelry which would identify him. His other hand went to the fastening of his mask. "Then know ye, Spaniard, that I am—"

Two pistol shots. Another. And another.

"Hi-*yee!* Captain! Captain! They come!"

Roger tossed a single word over his shoulder. "Later!" His mask remained upon his face, his rings in his purse, as he ran down the stairs out of the house.

The heavens appeared to have rained pirates. They were vaulting the barrier, running across the park, Bones John was down, and Walter and Dover Harry each was engaged in desperate combat with three or four yelling Beggars.

"Hi-*yee!*"

He met the first Dutchman as he ran around the fountain. With scarcely a break in his stride he stepped left, avoiding a cut, and sank his blade into a soft, giving body. A blade struck his neck, but with the flat. He spun around, slashing. Now he had two pirates in front of him, now one, now suddenly three. He saw open mouths, wild-staring eyes, beyond the blades. He did not dare to use the point in this position, but cut and slashed like any Channel pirate himself. The teachings of Marozzo and Manciolino were useless here; but the trained eye, and the quick wrist, were faithful companions in time of need.

One Dutchman went to his knees, dropping his cutlass, holding both hands to a red pulpy throat, while he coughed a great gush of blood which sprang out of him as though delighted to be released.

The other two stepped back, awed.

Roger saw Captain Van Boomstaat racing for the house. Roger forgot the two Dutchmen who faced him, and started after the Captain.

One pirate thought quickly, stepped forward, his cutlass raised. For an instant, as he turned to run, Roger was fully exposed. But the pirate fell back, shrieking with pain, when a huge, rusty pike was slammed against his shinbones. A preposterous little figure, scarcely four feet tall, scuttled away like a mouse.

Two other pirates reached the front door just behind Van Boomstaat, just in front of Roger. Roger cut one of them down, but the other struck him with a cudgel. The blow sent Roger spinning through the doorway. He tried to straighten, lift his sword. The cudgel fell again, from behind.

Roger went to one knee. But he rose, ignoring the man with the cudgel. He started up the stairs after Van Boomstaat. The ambassador! The ambassador must not be hurt!

Abruptly the world went black. He could see nothing, hear nothing save a terrible roar; yet for a little time he could feel his body, as though it were padded, not hurting him, thump gently down from a step to step.

WHEN the blackness faded, and the roaring softened in his ears, he staggered to his feet again. Everything was curiously quiet. He made his way out of the house, around to the back. He saw two smallboats moving toward the pinnace. In one of these, erect and scornful, with the pirate chief looming above him, stood Don Bernardino de Mendoza, representative of his Most Catholic Majesty Philip II, by grace of God, King of Castile, King of Leon, King of Aragon, of the Two Sicilies—

It did not seem amazing to Roger that he still gripped his own rapier. Nor that he was brandishing it, and wildly yelling wild threats, as he waded out into the water.

From one of the boats a laugh drifted back. The men still aboard the pinnace already were unfurling her sails, and the canvas appeared white and sweet in the sunlight, while Captain Roger Vambrace, waist-deep in water, yelled and screamed, waving his sword.

From behind him:

"Hi, what's this? What make ye here?"

Roger didn't turn at first. He had heard the voice; but he was intent upon one thing only—the fact that the ambassador was lost.

"Get in there, Tom and fetch the fellow. He's gone mad, I wot!"

Then Roger turned.

There were fourteen or fifteen men on the shore near the stable. All were armed, and obviously all were sailors. Roger never had seen any of them before, but he recognized the leader from descriptions. Anybody in England then would have recognized this leader.

A short man, thick-set, but round and firm and solid. He had little hands, little feet, yet his chest was a tun for girth. His face was very red, and his trig beard was bright red too, which served to make his eyes seem the bluer. He was bravely clad in dark purple silk slashed and paneled in peach, and his doublet was thick with gold lace, studded with rosettes of pearl. A silver whistle hung by a silver chain around his neck.

Roger splashed back to the shore, trying to run, almost falling forward in his haste.

He gasped:

"The ambassador!"

"Aye, the ambassador. Where is he?"

Roger waved, panting.

"Van Boomstaat! They're taking him aboard! The ambassador!"

Francis Drake never was one for slow decision, for the wasting of time in crises. He had come to this remote house in the expectation of supervising some solemn mummery, of chasing off Englishmen whose names he didn't wish to know and whose faces he didn't wish to see, of soothing the ruffled feelings of a grandee from Madrid. He had found a shambles, a park littered with dead and dying men, some in masks, some clearly Dutch sailors. He had found a house splintered and shredded by shot; a coach as full of holes as any Swiss cheese, and crazily surmounted by a weathervane; a young man wet with blood and sweat and sea water, who waved a bloody rapier and screamed something about the ambassador.

He didn't hesitate. Van Boomstaat, eh? It explained much. He had been wondering about the babbled tales told by those hysterical servants at Plymouth. The attack, from what was comprehensible in their stories, had been altogether too realistic. But Van Boomstaat? Ah!

There was a single rowboat left. Roger had not even noticed it.

"Tom! Watts! Crocker! Big Ned! at those oars! Hixon at the rod, Walsh and Little Ned with him! Nay, that's the sum, lest we sink the tub. The rest of you strip and swim it!"

Somehow Roger scrambled aboard. His rapier still in his right fist, his dagger in his left, he stood at the bow of that leaky, absurd little craft, alongside of England's greatest admiral.

"Straight for her, Hixom! Pull, you Devon hunks! Was it babies I picked? Pull!"

The anchor was up, and the pinnace was moving, but very slowly. Frantic men were shaking loose her sails. The lateen was fully spread, and filling. The mainsail rose jerkily. There was no time to man the sweeps, for Van Boomstaat had thrown into this fray every member of his crew, and these fellows had barely

regained the pinnace when the rowboat navy was upon them. The waist rail was low, and Drake's men swarmed over it without a shout, but swiftly, efficiently. You knew that they had done this before. And Captain Drake himself, as in the past, was the first to go.

With the battle, which was chiefly forward, Roger Vambrace had nothing to do. He made for the half-deck cabin, into which a moment before he'd seen a turquoise doublet disappear.

It was so much like a scene the previous morning on the highway outside of Plymouth! There was Don Bernardino, tall, erect, scorning to plead for quarter. There was Otto Van Boomstaat, a pistol in one hand, a sword in the other—and the pistol pointed at Don Bernardino. Van Boomstaat pulled the trigger.

The striker fell without a flash. The priming was wet.

Van Boomstaat lifted his sword—but Roger Vambrace was upon him by that time. There was no room for a stroke, a slash. The pirate thrust full-length. Roger lifted the blade with his own, out and away, and ran Van Boomstaat precisely through the heart.

He stared across the body at the Spaniard.

"And you still wear a mask," Don Bernardino whispered.

Roger took the mask off. He took the sword from Van Boomstaat's first, the swordbelt and dagger from Van Boomstaat's waist; and these he returned to Mendoza.

"You'll meet me now," he said.

He didn't wait for an answer. He turned and went out on deck. He was not certain what he sought, but it seemed altogether natural to find Mite Wilson crouched in the rowboat which had brought England's greatest admiral to this pinnace. How the midget had contrived to get aboard, in the confusion, Roger didn't ask. But he didn't wonder about it.

"Hi!" he addressed the little man.

"Good m'lord?"

"Take the oars and wait for us. We'll return in a moment."

He went back into the cabin.

"Come."

"Your face is not unhandsome, and your swordplay is good for a mere Englishman, but I have not yet learned whether—"

"I'll enlighten you on the way. Come."

They were not noticed. Francis Drake and his men were calling upon the last bitter group of pirates to surrender. Drake's men were still climbing into the pinnace, but these newcomers emerged Triton-like from the very water itself, dripping, shivering, shaking the brine from their eyes; they had cutlasses clenched in their teeth.

When the small boat was half way to the shore, somebody aboard the pinnace started to shout. But the three paid no attention to this. Mite Wilson was rowing. Roger was dumping the contents of his purse into Don Bernardino's lap. Observe! The signet ring, bearing the family martlet. The arms and crest upon this enamel plaque, the motto too. Normans who had come over with William and had been great nobles even then. Lived there anybody from Madrid who dared to deny a Vambrace the satisfaction of arms? Don Bernardino tucked the purse, trinkets and all, into his own belt.

"It is well that I know at last who you are," he said coldly. "Should we perchance be prevented from fighting, 'twill identify you for the public hangman."

"We'll not be prevented from fighting! There's nobody ashore able to stop us, and we'll measure blades within the next two minutes!"

Mite Wilson didn't say a word.

THEY sprang from the rowboat. They walked across the stable yard, passing Don Bernardino's battered, chipped,

smashed coach, still glittering in some places with its bright varnish. The weathervane showed very silly perched on the coach roof; its arm was broken, and with dogged persistence it continued to point south, though in fact the wind had been full from the north these past three hours.

The blades were measured. Each was exactly 45½ inches, exceptionally long. Don Bernardino's, a Toledo, was slightly heavier, the hilt being encrusted with gemmery. Roger's was his favorite, a gray Bilbo.

"Here before the fountain? Will that suit your haughtiness?"

"'Tis somewhat overthick with bodies, but 'twill serve." Don Bernardino was tucking in the cambric at his cuffs. "And indeed, Englishman, any place would be a good place to kill you."

"On guard, sir!"

The Spaniard saluted ceremoniously, while Roger, his blade poised, his dagger in position, waited motionless as a rock. Finally they clinked weapons.

Roger had been hot, for all that the day was December 13, but now a cold hand seemed to stroke the sweat from his limbs and body. His muscles relaxed, and excitement went out of him. His head no longer throbbed. His mind was as chilly and clear as a mountain pool.

He had heard much of the Spanish swordsmen, followers or direct pupils of the celebrated Geronimo de Carranza, who were exact and unhurried, mathematically certain of each move. He had known, somehow, from their very first meeting, that Mendoza would prove a true master. The man was long and steely, without an ounce of loose flesh. He held his dagger at his left hip, his rapier far advanced with the point directed at Roger's face. He began to take little steps, now to the right, now to the left.

Roger beat the motionless blade in front of him, half-lunged. The Spaniard flicked his wrist, and steel burned Roger's right forearm. He must be careful. The Spaniard resumed those mincing steps, like a man eager to break into dance. He moved around and around Roger, but his blade was motionless. Roger moved with him.

Again Roger went in. Again that flick of the wrist. This time Roger dropped his guard, caught the Toledo with one of his quillons. But it had been close.

Dangerous as a viper, this Don Bernardino. Don't try to feint, don't hope to bully him. He was coming forward now with minute cat-steps, his point unwavering. Roger watched that point, fascinated. It dropped swiftly. It rose. From a high tierce it slid in over Roger's blade.

Roger stepped back, caught the Toledo on his dagger. In affairs of honor against lesser swordsmen, Roger sometimes had scorned to use his dagger at all, both defending and attacking with his rapier. Now he was glad to have the shorter blade. There had been an instant when he might have crossed left, flicked a *stramazzone* to the Spaniard's chin. But that would be petty fighting, fancy fighting. What was a chin cut? Roger's point must have but one target, and that the heart. Nothing less. Nothing else would divert him.

Little Wilcox, squatting by the fountain, watched all this with brilliant, beady eyes. He never said a word or made a sound.

Incredibly, inexplicably, Don Bernardino tried the same down-thrust a second time. Possibly he did this for the very reason that it would prove unexpected? Well, it did. Yet Roger was prepared against it. He caved his body, passed his left foot over, caught the Toledo on his dagger. . . . Don Bernardino gasped, sprang back, trying to cross with his dagger to bring his rapier into defense line again. But Roger had streaked into a low, full lunge. His sword hand was higher than his head. His point perfectly found its mark on the left side

of the Spaniard's breast—and snapped!

"Mother of angels!"

They fell back, both of them, Roger waving his broken blade, cursing wildly, and Mendoza dead-pale in silence. Men were pelting across the park, shouting, rushing between them. Mite Wilson danced up and down screaming :

"He wears a brigandine! He wears a brigandine!"

Captain Drake himself pushed Roger back. Roger was storming:

"You saw it, sir! The man's mailed beneath his doublet! You saw it! I had him full to the heart, and the blade scraped mail!"

He would have charged with his stump of a rapier, but Drake and others dragged him back into the house, while he fumed.

Drake snapped:

"Sense, man! Unheat yourself! You were dutied to keep that coward alive, not to kill him!"

"He wore a brigandine!"

"I saw it. We all saw it. But unheat yourself, for the love of God! Here—sit here upon these steps. Wait for me to return."

Roger dropped upon a step. It was inside of the house, in the dim entrance hall. He put his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hands, stared through tears of mortification at the broken sword which lay at his feet.

NO SWORD left. Not even a sword! His good men all were gone — old-time cutthroats, yet withal soldiers of whom any captain in Christiandom might be proud. All were gone. Bones John and sighing Fat John, and Andrew, and Walter, and laughing Harry of Dover. His sword was gone, and his soldiers. His honor. No doubt his life too—for he would be safe now nowhere in England. Mendoza had seen him heard his name. More, Mendoza had his rings with the Vambrace coat armor engraved upon them. Even the rings were gone, the plaques. Even his purse.

"Good my lord—"

The little fellow with the bright red turban. What was his name? Oh, yes —Wilson. Mite Wilson. He sat at Roger's feet like a faithful dog, looking up with troubled eyes. Roger nodded gravely to him.

"Yes, pickpocket?"

"Is it— Do you worry about—about the purse?"

Roger shrugged.

"Aye, it contains my signets. But 'tis not merely that—"

The midget was fumbling in the folds of that all-containing garment, and soon he handed Roger the purse, filled as before.

"In the ado— When they came shouting there—I—I—It was a thought mayhap you'd wish this back, eh?"

"It was a good thought," Roger said, accepting the purse with a smile, "and I thank you for it—Mite."

After a time Drake appeared. He stood with his feet wide-spread, his fists upon his hips, shaking his head as he stared down at Roger.

"We hauled the coach around, hitched the horses. His ambassadorship is sent on his way, with most of his servants too, for they'd trailed me a mile or two behind from Plymouth. So he's up for London. Methinks he'll not chatter overmuch about this outfalling, captain, for that he knows we all saw him wearing a brigandine while engaged in an affair of honor. And lucky for you that he did! It spares your neck, sirrah!"

"Nay, methinks my neck'll be hemped withouten it."

"'Tis a certainty England's no place for you. And I cannot offer to take you to the continent, for I must away tonight while the wind holds."

"They'd pursue me to the continent. They'd pursue me anywhere, while the scandal's hot in the land."

Drake said softly:

"The Indies, captain, are a many long mile off."

"Eh?"

"Certs, Burghley will shed no tears if you do not return. A courtier could carry to him a letter of explanation which would reach London sooner than our fine-feathers ambassador. I've heard of you, Captain Vambrace, and methinks in what I'm about to adventure I could find full use for such a man."

"I haven't even a sword!"

"I have a hold filled with them."

"Nay, but I've no apparel!"

"I carry sixty-four doublets with trunk hose to match, but doubtless these would be not large enough. But I'd not trouble on that score. Spanish clothes are full in the fashion now, and methinks it likely we can soon supply you with many of these."

"My soldiers are dead! I've none to attend me! As a gentleman—"

There was a timid, eager tug at his sleeve.

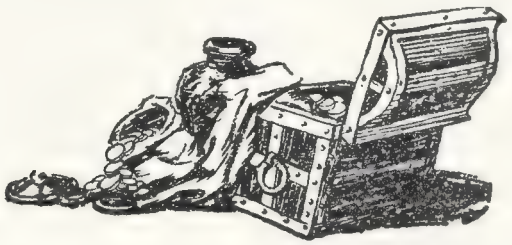
"Good m'lord—"

Mount Edgcumbe was afire from the sunset when the *Pelican*, 100 tons, 18 guns, Captain-general, Francis Drake, dropped down Plymouth Sound for the open sea. Her name soon was to be changed to the *Golden Hind*. Close behind her, neatly in line, were the *Elizabeth*, the *Marigold*, the *Swan*, the *Benedict*. They were not going to Alexandria for currants.

The waving, cheering crowds along the Barbican had become a dark blur. The little boats had fallen behind. Far back of the hill, spurring to the eastward in front of a fan-shaped cloud of dust, a messenger carried a letter addressed to Lord Treasurer Burghley. Somewhere on that same road too was a weighty, lumbrous, ball-pocked coach drawn by eight horses, and in it a grandee of Spain chewed his lower lip in seething but soundless fury. A broken weathervane, all unnoticed, reposed still upon the roof of this coach, and indefatigibly it pointed to the south.

Roger Vambrace leaned against the poop rail, within sight of the waist where a quick-voiced midget, the center of a crowd of yonkers and deckhands, was doing astounding things with glass balls.

"Nay, not trickery, but art! True art is this, as the Queen's Majesty herself said to me when I performed before her last month. Observe this ball. Ah! where is it now? And here's another—but where hath it gone? My conscience! Who among ye will wager a ha'penny that this ball will disappear in less time than any bird can wink its eye, eh?"



RED OF THE ARROWHEAD

Part Two-- By GORDON YOUNG

RED CLARK of the Arrowhead was in the Best Bet when Joe Bush, kingpin gambler of Tulluco, hit pretty Sara Timton. A sign above the bar said "Anybody wearing guns indoors will be arrested." Joe Bush threw a knife and Red shot him dead.

Joe Bush's mother, Mrs. Hepple, rules the Hepple ranch, rival of the Arrowhead. The Johnsons, father and son, Tulluco bankers, are allied with her. Red's employer, Miz George, is bitter against the Hepples, who had killed her husband.

To avenge Joe Bush's death, three gamblers attack Red. He kills them and a $1000 reward is put on his head.

At Arrowhead, where rustlers and mortgages and sheepherders harass Mrs. George, her granddaughter Catharine Pineton entertains an Easterner, Harold Mason, to whom she is secretly married. Red's friend, old Jeb Grimes, bitter cowhand, watches as gun rule again becomes law at the Arrowhead.

CHAPTER V

A GUEST TREATED ROYALLY

RED CAME back, got off his horse, but stood holding the reins as if expecting to leave right away. Mrs. George motioned him to a chair.

"Set down. You haven't told me yet how that ruckus started."

Red went to a chair, dragging his

spurs. He sat down, hiking a foot up across his knee, fingered the spur strap and told her, or started to; but Mrs. George cut in shrill and furious:

"Have you been carrying on with a dance hall girl? Sara Timton at that!"

"I ain't!" Red meant it. When he meant it, Mrs. George never doubted, but it made her mad that the killing grew out of such a trivial, almost not respectable quarrel.

"You were a fool. Some ways, Red, you haven't a lick of sense! Not a lick!"

He agreed, humbly.

She fell moody, took a deep breath. Her voice was low and even, had much the same tone that she used in talking to pups and Mexican toddlers.

"Red, I'm an old woman. Purt-near through riding. Troubles pile up one way and another. I'm going to tell you something. It'll make you feel bad. I want you to. Then maybe you'll try from now on to do more like I want."

"Yes'm, Miz George."

"Couple years ago the Johnsons, nice as mush with butter on it, coaxed me to borrow and buy more cows. I ain't blaming them for that. I am blaming them some because they promised it wouldn't make any difference whether the mortgage was paid off. Said they'd renew it. Now do you know what their excuse is for refusing to renew it?"

"No 'm."

"Old Johnson told me right after I got back from my trip that as long as I keep men that insulted and threatened him, he didn't very well see how I could expect him to renew that mortgage."

Red looked up, somber-eyed from under lowered lips.

"I'll go right into town and say you fired me."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" Mrs. George hit her knee with a fist. "I told him I'd hire whom I damned pleased. I told him I'd go broke before I'd let him, or any man, meddle with my business. Right now, with beef down and rustlers and nesters and sheep I doubt if I could clear up the debt with every hide and hair on the range. But of course, things 'll change. Beef 'll go up. It just has to. Can't go any lower! But don't you think you ought to try some, a little, for my sake to keep out of trouble?"

"Next feller," Red blurted earnestly, "as makes me want to shoot 'im, I'll—I'll break his damn neck!"

Mrs. George laughed. Red was so earnest about it. She picked up her glass. It was empty but she tipped it, draining the last drop. She looked at the back of her hand, turned it over, was looking down as she spoke. "Red?"

"Yes'm."

"Why don't you marry Kate?'

Red shifted uneasily, studied, grinned. "She ain't asked me."

"Don't try to be funny. She likes you."

"Miz George, I draw more pay and do less work on your ranch than any place I ever was in my life. But I'd cut an' run first. I get into enough trouble as 'tis."

She simply wasn't listening. "Women," she said, "like to be made to do things."

"I ain't going to make none of 'em do that to me!"

'Nita, the stately fat Mexican woman who had grown from childhood, and raised her own family, under the Dobbs' roof, filled the doorway and said that supper was ready.

Red started to leave but Mrs. George told him, "No you don't. You are eating with me."

"Shucks. I'm all dirty and—and—"

"And what?"

"I'm more at home at the tail of a chuck wagon."

"So am I. But you are staying."

Red had often eaten with Mrs. George, elbows on the oil cloth, the food stacked between them. But a white cloth made him nervous.

Mrs. George was at ease in the shadow of a chuck wagon or at a governor's ta-

ble. Since Catherine had come to the ranch the table was laid each night with fresh linen and polished silver. Wines were served. The girls brought around dishes for helpings. Mrs. George liked it. She was, she said, too lazy and tired to care for the fancy layout when alone; but this made her remember the gay old days when officers and their wives filled the Dobbs house with merriment. She was, she said, glad Kate could do something well: have dinner served nicely without fuss. Mrs. George hated a fuss unless she made it herself.

Red went around behind the kitchen and washed up, then dragged his spurs into the dining room and stood awkwardly. It was a large room, lighted with oil lamps that had painted china shades. Very pretty, he thought, but easy broke.

Mr. Mason's two big drinks had warmed him. He wasn't intoxicated at all, but his undertone carried farther than he thought. While waiting for Mrs. George to appear he said in an aside to Catherine:

"Is that servant to sit with us?"

Red's skin felt blistered. His ears almost shriveled. *Servant!* And he a top-hand puncher! Of all names, including cuss-words, none would have stung more. That was enough to make a top-hand puncher want to tie a man to a bed of cactus over an ant hill and set by singing.

In another ten seconds Red would have been out of the room, and not all the horses on the Dobbs' ranch could have dragged him back; but Mrs. George came clicking in. He couldn't dash out in front of her.

She had changed to a cool muslin dress with a long train and powdered her sun-blackened old face. Her wrinkled hands were as white as a baby's from always wearing gloves. She had slipped on some rings. He thought she looked mighty nice and stylish.

Mr. Mason with a kind of eager fluster placed the chair for Mrs. George, then hurried to give Catherine's a little push. Red's eyes followed him with a furtive baleful gleam. Kind of a fat face, the fellow had. Big wide staring eyes—sort of calf-like. Too particular about clothes. Not such a nice looking fellow, after all.

Red sat down and glared at his plate. He felt sweaty and wanted to scratch his back. He didn't think it would be manners to go clawing about with his fingers, so he pressed his back against the chair and wiggled a little. He did not touch the wine. He cut his steak with the fork jabbed upright and firm in the meat, took big mouthfuls and almost choked as he chewed, chewed, chewed, solemnly looking at no one.

Suddenly there was a scampering scurry across the floor, shrill loud yaps, and Catherine's poodle began clawing at Mr. Mason's knee, trying to get up into his lap.

Mr. Mason exclaimed joyfully, and a bit loud: "Why, hel-oh Trix, old girl!" and leaned over to pat and wool the frisky fluff-ball.

Mrs. George had a wine glass near her lips. Her look was as if aiming a rifle across the glass rim.

Catherine spoke up hastily. "He was playing with Trixy and—and she knows he likes her!"

Mrs. George drank the wine, did not flutter an eyelid. In Spanish she told a girl to take the poodle from the room. When the girl came back Mrs. George told her, also in Spanish, to keep Mr. Mason's glass filled.

Catherine's glances protested anxiously as she saw Mr. Mason sipping his refilled glass. She thought it nice of her grandmother to signal attentively if the girl neglected to refill the glass promptly; but it distressed her to see Hal grow a little woozy, vague, and slightly loud. He knew he had had enough, but Mrs. George, beaming, kept lifting her glass, bidding him drink with her.

Mr. Mason stumbled a little in rising from dinner. Red somehow couldn't rejoice. The look on Catherine's face hurt too much. He tried to dodge off but Mrs. George nailed him with, "Come on, Red, we'll have coffee in the patio."

Catherine looked as hurt as if she had been hit with a whip and huddled in a deep chair in a dark corner. Mr. Mason's tongue thickened. He drank a little brandy with his coffee. Mrs. George, cruel as an Apache squaw at the torture, encouraged him to talk; and she dragged comments out of the wretched Catherine.

Red itched and writhed. He forgave Mr. Mason the "servant." Red didn't know just what had happened, something about that poodle, it seemed; but Mrs. George had surely turned cruel. People who tried to run shenanegans on her usually did get the worst of it.

Mr. Mason lay back wearily, relaxed. His head rolled to one side. He snored a little. Catherine, in the deep shadows, tried to choke down sobs. Mrs. George said, "Kate, what are you laughing at?" Catherine arose and ran on stumbling feet into the house.

"Red," Mrs. George told him, "call a couple of girls to help you get Mr. Mason into his room. Put him to bed. Then come back."

Mr. Mason was thoroughly out, limp as a rag. The girls made mild jokes. Mrs. George, gray and grim, smiled a little as she rolled a cigarette.

Red came back, reluctant. Mrs. George, with legs crossed and feet on a chair before her, lay with face up, looking at the stars. She was still smiling faintly and did not move.

Red planted himself in front of her. "'Tain't fair!"

"Nobody held his nose and poured it down!"

"He was all wore out anyhow. Rode in the stage. Then out here. Purt-near eighty miles and him soft. He was tired enough to drop in his tracks!"

Mrs. George sat up, smiled grimly. "I hate people that try to deceive me—and don't!"

"What you mean?"

"You saw how that poodle knew him!"

"But Miss Kate said—"

"Lied!"

"Miss Kate?"

"They put up a job on me, Red. Pretending they were strangers. I'll fix 'em!"

"But are you sure about that poodle?"

"Of course I'm sure. I asked 'Nita before dinner where that damn poodle was. Locked up in the cellar all afternoon."

"But that colonel's letter?" Red insisted.

"Old fool of an Army bachelor! He has known Kate from the day she was born. Knows this Mason. I can see through it, clearly. They all thought this Mason would come on a visit and be so handsome and gallant and fine that the old lady would kick her heels together in joy at having her granddaughter fall in love with him! Thinks well of himself to think that, don't he!" She rolled a cigarette. "He's just the kind—I can smell it!—that's interested in having his wife rich."

"Aw shucks, that ain't fair. And me, Miz George, I been drunk lots o' times an'—"

"I don't care how drunk he gets. I wanted Kate to see that he would get drunk and talk like an ass. She's so prissy—with her tea and poodle! I'll show her what's inside of him. You'll see!" Mrs. George snapped her fingers. "I wouldn't give that for a man that wouldn't get drunk. And I mean *drunk!*"

"Maybe he'll pan out all right."

"Not if I can help it, he won't! And Red?"

"Yes'm."

"Tell Slim Hawks to show up here at the house tomorrow morning with the buckboard. We'll haul the dogs down to Huskinses places to look for the hide off that shank bone Harry Paloo saw

there today. Haul that Mr. Mason along, too!"

'Holy gosh, why him?"

"He wants to see how we do things out West here. We'll show 'im! Besides, I'm not going to leave him here at the house alone with Kate, not a holy minute! 'Strangers!' "

CHAPTER VI

Rustlers and Nesters

LIGHTS were out when Red went down to the bunkhouse. There weren't many boys staying here now. They were out in the line camps with eyes peeled for rustlers. Only three or four, mostly old-timers, were on the home ranch.

Red saw the glow of a cigarette where someone squatted near the door. That would be Jeb Grimes. Jeb never seemed to much care when he went to bed, if at all.

Jeb got up. In long underwear like a dimly seen ghost and moved with cat-soft tread on bare feet.

Jeb spoke. His voice was low, almost a purr:

"I hear tell, son, you shot a gambler. That driver he said—"

"It was thisaway, Jeb. . . ."

Jeb squatted to listen. His long fingers felt about on the ground, gathered a few pebbles. He thoughtfully pitched them one by one.

"Gamblers an' city thieves, son, has to have law an' order back of 'em. Elsewise they can't do their dirty work. Stands to reason. 'Cause honest men, left to 'emselves, wouldn't put up with such goin's on. But you wanta walk mighty circumspec'. That Miz Hepple 'll shore try to have you killed. I," said Jeb with grave emphasis, "know that woman. Get along to bed. I'll set an' think some."

The next morning as Red rode up to the house he saw a commotion among the dogs up under the spring-fed watering trough. The overflow of the trough was piped by hollow logs down into the pasture. The logs leaked, making puddles of mud.

The younger collies were bounding about, barking, digging in the mud, sniffing, jumping back. Among them was a little curly puff ball with a blue ribband about her neck. Trixy was loose. She jumped in and out, barking as much as to say, "Fellows, I'm really a good sport. I don't like to be bathed, brushed, and wear ribbands!" She was stepped on, knocked over, rolled about, all in burly fellowship.

The dogs had something under one of the logs. They looked at Red and yapped as if asking him to get off and help. He guessed it was a snake—bull snake. The dogs didn't poke their noses up so close to where a rattler lay. Besides, old Duke lay off to one side with mouth open as if half laughing. That wasn't his way if rattlers were about.

Red got off, caught Trixy, remounted. She wriggled, bit his hands but not in anger, and with quick lift of head and rasping swipe of tongue on his face apologized for her roughness.

He rode up to the front of the house.

Old Slim Hawks was there, sitting on a rail of the veranda, smoking a pipe and chewing. He eyed Red, eyed the poodle, spit, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Whar'd you ketch the mozelflickdad, hn? Thar bite is pizen, Red."

"It's been carryin' off Miz George's cows."

He took the muddy poodle into the house. One of 'Nita's daughters told him that Miss Kate hadn't showed up yet. He went to her door, knocked.

"Who is it, please?"

"Me—and Trix."

Catherine opened the door. Her eyes were swollen and red. "Oh, is Trixy hurt?"

"Nope. She's just been out with the boys."

Catherine put out her hands, drew them back. "I can't take her like that. She'll get everything dirty. Please, will you give her to 'Nita. And Red, you mustn't judge Hal by last night. He was tired and—and you don't think grandmother did it on purpose, do you?"

"She hates teetotalers. I mean Miz George *hates* 'em!"

Her eyes filled tearfully. "Where is he now?"

"Don't know. But if he does like I do at just about this time of day on the morning after, he's got his head under the pump and is sayin' prayerful, loud and earnest, 'never, no more, ever'!"

"Oh," said Catherine with tearful fierceness, "I will never forgive him! Never! But you, please be nice to him, won't you, Red?"

"I sure will."

"And take Trixy to 'Nita for me. You fearful little fool!"

Trixy yapped indignant protest at such slander.

RED was out on the porch with Slim Hawks when Mrs. George showed up with the humbled Mr. Mason at her heels. He looked pretty pale around the gills, sort of puff-cheeked, with big black holes in his face for eyes. At her "Morning, boys," Hawks and Red bobbed, grinned, pulled at hat brims.

"Slim, you and Red load up the dogs. They'll maybe take out after coyotes unless we haul 'em. Mr. Mason will ride with you, Slim."

As they were catching dogs, Hawks grumbled with side look at Mason, "Usn't be agin the law to shoot 'em on sight, his kind!"

"Miz George is doin' crueler 'n that. She's taking him cross-country, rough road, in the sun, with a hangover—an' you drivin' wild broncs."

Hawks grinned a little at the fun he was going to have scaring this perkified galoot.

Red was tying Duke, cussing him fondly. Mason came up. "I must have made an awful ass of myself last night?"

"How you mean?" Red looked as innocent as a bright-eyed babe.

"I was drunk. I'm not used to drinking. I can't even remember how I got to bed."

"'F I ever got what you call drunk as you done, I'd be proud of myself. You was just all wore out and sleepy."

"Cath—, I mean Miss Pineton, must have thought— I haven't seen her this morning and—"

"Oh I wouldn't over-fret myself about her. She likes you fine."

Mrs. George waited until the buckboard was far down the road. "I don't want him getting out and walking back," she explained.

When they overtook the buckboard, Mason was holding on hard and swaying this way and that. He was in pain. He had a big head. He was boil-sore and stiff from yesterday's riding.

Slim Hawks pulled his broncs down to a walk as Mrs. George reined up for a word. Red came up on the other side and asked, "How you making out?"

Mason looked weak and sick. He said, "Whew!" and tried to grin.

Red eyed the grin, studied for a minute, nodded vaguely. He leaned from the saddle, confidential:

"In a little while, no matter how fast you're goin', you just ask Slim there why the hell he don't keep up with us. Then you set tight! But ask 'im that."

Mason gave Red a suspicious stare. Red nodded solemnly.

Mrs. George said, "Now pour the leather into them broncs, Slim. I don't want to have to wait for you down to Huskinses."

She and Red went ahead at a gallop. After a time she pulled down, letting the horses breathe at a walk.

"Red?"

"Yes'm."

"Is that neice of Harris' pretty?"

"Umm-m-m some. When they smile they all look purty to me. She smiled."

"I believe I'll go on into town and get her. To think Col. Howland would try a trick like that on me! I bet," she said hopeful, with a jerk of gloved thumb over her shoulder, "he's saying prayers!"

"And I bet," Red thought, "he's cussin' me!'

THE house of Huskinses had once been a tavern, was two storied, well built but now some dilapidated and nothing but a kind of road-house with a bad name. Even the road down Monohela way had taken a short cut as if shying off from the shiftless Huskinses. Old Huskins lived there with two long-nosed boys married to squaw-like women.

Red and Mrs. George galloped into Huskinses with the buckboard a couple of miles behind and out of sight over the rim of the Basin.

One of the Huskins women, the fat one, stuck her head out of the door and squawked, "Hey, paw! Paw! That Dobbs woman is here with that red-head!"

She stood glaring, a black-eyed, lank-haired dark-skinned slob in loose dirty wrapper. One of the Huskins boys pushed her roughly aside to make way for himself and came out shamble-footed.

He grinned sly and silly, said, "Mornin', Miz Dobbs. Was you wantin' somethun, hm?"

The other Huskins boy, older, shuffled out with hangdog look, neck adroop, eyes up, hat down, hands in his pocket.

Red put his toes at the edge of the stirrups and set his mouth tight to keep from speaking up, sudden. Mrs. George liked to run her show her own way without other people chirruping in, helpful.

Red saw the skinny Huskins woman flit across the doorway. She set a rifle against the wall, then stood in the doorway with arms folded, looking mean, but the next instant sullenly edged to one side, making way for Huskins.

He was wearing a high-crowned floppy hat but was barefooted and held a shotgun in the crook of an elbow. "Mornin', Miz Dobbs," he growled and stroked the gun butt. "I was jes' steppin' out f'r to knock over a couple of rabbits."

Mrs. George swung her horse, dropped the reins, went right up to him. The quirt dangled on her wrist as if she meant to use it. "You had fresh beef yesterday. Where's the hide?"

"Ow, why now, Miz Dobbs, you don't think I'd *steal* anybody's cows? Much less one o' yourn?"

"I ain't thinking, Huskins. I'm investigating!"

The skinny Huskins woman spoke up shrilly. "I'd like to scratch yore eyes out! 'Cause you own a few measly cows, you think nobody's got a right to eat beef 'less you say so!"

Old Huskins said, "Shet up, Mag! This ain't none o' yore put-in!" To Mrs. George, with abused humility: "You are shore welcome, since you don't trust my word, to 'vestigate all you want!"

Mrs. George flung up her quirt, brought it down with a smack against her boot. "Put down that gun while you talk to me!"

"Shore. Oh shore. I was jest steppin' out f'r—" He stood the gun against the wall behind him.

"Now, Huskins, where's that hide?"

"Look fer it!" Mag yelled.

"Why, Miz Dobbs," old Huskins protested, fingering his beard, while the two half-idiotic long-nosed boys looked on slyly and grinned, "'f I'd knowed you was comin', I'd saved that hide. But yest'd'y I sold it to a feller as stopped on his way to the mines. Fer a dollar." He drew a dollar from his pocket, held out his palm. "Now ain't thet too bad. I'm powerful sorry."

"Why didn't you show it to Harry Paloo?"

Huskins straightened a little, seem to swell some. "Why, Miz Dobbs, me, I'm a feller as can't be bulldozed. Them cowboys ain't got no business nosin' 'round my home. I don't like the way they ac', so high an' mighty! But you, now. *You*, Miz Dobbs, air a lady!"

"Right! I'm the damndest lady you ever saw when I catch folks chewing my beef!" The quirt snapped against her boot top. "And you are setting here on my range, doing no business at all and not a lick of work—yet eating fresh beef. So—"

"Oh my gosh, paw, looky!" the older Huskins boy bellowed, pointing.

The buckboard was streaking through a whirlwind of dust on the downgrade with Hawks pouring on leather as if he meant to upset the wagon. The broncs ran wild, the buckboard jumping at their heels. The dogs skittered and slid. The buckboard bounced and rocked on two wheels.

Near the foot of the grade, Hawks tightened the lines and began jerking as he put on the brake that smoked and squealed. He headed into the yard and ran his sweating team almost against the house before they came to a stop.

Mason sat there pale and sick, his gaze reproachfully on the back of Red's head.

Mrs. George called, "Turn 'em loose, Slim!"

Hawks untied the struggling dogs. One by one they hit the ground, ran this way and that, sniffing, and came up to Mrs. George, eying her as if for instructions. Cautiously, with far reach of nose and braced haunches they sniffed about the Huskinses. The Huskins' boys looked down their long noses and fidgetted.

"Take 'em around over the place, Red," said Mrs. George.

Red reined back, whistled, and began to ride at a walk around back of the house. He called the dogs by name, turning them this way and that as he scanned the ground himself for fresh earth. He guessed the Huskinses were too lazy to have carried the hide far.

Around back of the corral there was a fresh hole half filled with loose dirt. The dogs tore into it gleefully, pawing and sniffing.

Red climbed off, found a shovel in the wagon shed, and helped dig. The ground was not hard but was stony. Red sweat and cussed. When he went deep enough to hit hard ground he threw the shovel aside and began to roll a cigarette. The dogs scratched and sniffed the loose dirt. They were sensible dogs. Duke, with tongue a-drip and earth-covered, looked up at Red as much as to say, "It was here but they have taken it off."

"Yeah," Red grumbled, "they got scairt after old Paloo spoke up yesterday." He put away the tobacco and papers.

A drawled sneer-toned voice asked, "Ain't found nothin' yit, huh?"

There stood the younger long-nosed sly-grinning Huskins, hands in pockets, looking shiftless and pleased.

Red looked him over then moved an arm. Out came a gun. Red jumped forward, rammed the gun against the fellow's belly. "Where is it?"

"Ow! Don't shoot me!"

The gun's muzzle gouged. "You heard me!"

"Ow! Paw and the women drug it upstairs!"

"Dobbs branded?"

"Er course. But paw an' Mag 'll kill me if—"

"Feller, I'll give you three minutes to get around front and look innocent. Then I'll make believe the dogs trailed it into the house. Git!"

The fellow went with arms a-dangle and body hunched forward in hurrying.

"Few folks," Red mused, "are so dirty they can stand the stink of a hide in the house. These Huskinses would only think it was their socks. Only they don't wear socks."

RED had a hard time making the dogs come. The smell of the hide was in the dirt. He collared Duke, coaxed, half-dragging him. Others followed. Red got them to the back door. It was open. He pushed Duke into the kitchen. "Find it, boy!" In a moment they were sniffing, scurrying about, barking.

Old Huskins' startled bellow came from the front door as he faced about on the porch, "Here, what's goin' on!"

Mag shrieked, "Git them dogs outen the house!'

Red had guided Duke through the kitchen and into the big room—dining room in tavern days. The wide stairs came in to it. Red, pushing Duke along up the steps looked down into Huskins double-barrelled shotgun, twenty feet away.

Huskins roared, "Git down thet thar dog or I'll kill im!

The fat Huskins woman called in anxious coaxing, "Here, doggie, nice doggie. Come back, doggie!"

Duke turned his head with mouth open, panting. He looked up at Red with a kind of wistful perplexity. Red eyed Huskins, spoke slowly:

"You shoot that dog and I'll kill you!"

Mrs. George, with hurried purposefulness but no fluster, pushed the fat Huskins woman out of the way, swung back her arm and her quirt lashed alongside of the way, swung back her arm and her quirt lashed alongside of Huskins' face, a thong bridging his nose, raising a welt.

"Drop that gun!"

The gun was fired with convulsive jerk of finger, the charge striking high. The quirt struck again. Old Huskins howled, jumped, swung the gun about to strike at her. Mrs. George fended against the swing of the gun with upthrown arm and lashed her quirt on Huskins' face. One of the Huskins boys struck Mrs. George and Red, with gun a-swing, yelled at him and crouched to jump; but Duke went first—rose from the stairs, right over the bannisters, in downward leap.

Mag flung up the rifle, shot at the dog, missed. Duke didn't even notice. He hit the floor and bounded straight at the back of Tug Huskins' neck, bearing him over and down. Other dogs surged into the fight, tearing at Tug Huskins.

Red, much as the dog had done, leaped the bannisters. The jar of the jump put him knees down with an elbow on the floor. Mag reeled back, lifting the rifle at him, cursed him through gleaming teeth. Red jumped with arm swinging to strike the barrel aside, then whaled his revolver against her head as hard as he could. She staggered back. A hazy look clouded her fierce eyes as she fell sprawling, the rifle clattered from her hands.

The lanky Hawks had charged in, but stood interested, slightly agrin. Mrs. George had yanked loose the shotgun from old Huskins and held it by the barrel with the butt trailing the floor as if she meant to use it for a club later on. She had Huskins backed up to the wall. She lashed him about the face and head. He huddled his arms over his face and she lashed them. He danced on one foot, then the other. He howled, pleading. She lashed his arms till he swung them wildly, then she criss-crossed the thongs on his bared face. He bellowed, he squirmed, he hopped like he was dancing on a hot stove. Then with elbows up around his face he ducked low and made a surging lunge pass her, ran out of the room, into the kitchen and out back of the house.

Mrs. George gave the shotgun a fling, carelessly. It skittered across the floor. She faced about. Red and Hawks were yanking at the dogs, knocking them about, swearing. Duke, if left to himself, would have chewed the fellow up in three snaps, but there was such a snarling huddle that the dogs had got in one another's way. The fat Huskins

woman wrung her hands and howled that the dogs were killing her man. The younger Huskins stood as if half-frozen, mouth agape, eyes fright-widened.

Tug Huskins was half-naked, torn, bad hurt and worse scared. Hawks and Red got him and his howling woman into a room and shut the door. The dogs broke loose and bounded at the door, whimpering.

Mrs. George drew the blood-stained quirt through gloved fingers. She was breathing hard but slow. Her hat dangled back on her shoulders. She set it straight. "All right, Red. Show me that hide!"

Red had one wild moment of doubt. If there were no hide there would surely be the devil to pay after such a ruckus. Maybe that young Huskins had lied for a joke. Red pounced on the stupid Huskins. "It's that hide or yourn! Lead the way!"

Red jerked him forward and from behind pushed him on, up the stairs.

They went through a room foul with the stench of unwashed clothes, un-sunned bedding that lay touseled on sagging springs over an uncarpeted floor. Young Huskins opened a door into a dark place. "It—it's in thar!"

"Dig it out!"

"Git a light."

"Get it yourself!"

The flickering lamp showed a kind of disordered catch-all sort of store room. In the stale air there was the inmistakable stink of green hide, very pleasing to Red's nose. "Drag 'er out!"

Huskins walked backwards, pulling the hide after him. The folded hide opened up. It was covered with dirt. Huskins went backwards on the stairs, pulling the hide down.

The hide was spread out on the floor, hair up. Branded Arrowhead.

Mason, shocked and wobbly, stood just inside the doorway. He looked bewildered and said more to himself than meaning to be heard, "All over a cow!"

Red spun about. "'Tain't! It's over them bein' the kind that steal cows!"

Mag Huskins had come to life and staggered to a chair. She held her head, welted to the size of a turnip and gazed blear-eyed.

Mrs. George told Red to find old Huskins. "Fetch him in here."

"Gosh a'mighty," Red thought. "He's prob'bly a mile off and goin' fast!" But he said promptly, "You bet!" and went out with hurried jangle of spurs, climbed his horse and rode about, singing out, "High-Oh, Huskins? Come a-trottin'. 'F you don't, I'll turn the dogs loose! You hear me?"

Huskins limped into view. His face was ridged with welts, some already bluish to black, others bleeding. "Fer God's sake, have some mercy!"

"You've had a-plenty that you ain't hung! Waltz right along in to Miz George."

Huskins went in, bulky and chinging. Mrs. George rested with a foot on the bottom of a chair and leaned forward with an elbow on her raised knee.

"Huskins!"

"Now, please, Miz—"

"You are moving. Pack and git!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Huskins.

But Mag shrieked, "We won't go! This here place ain't yourn! We got some rights. We jest ain't goin'!"

Mrs. George's foot came off the chair with a snap. She walked across the room with *sushing* rustle of corduroy, drawing the quirt between her fingers as if to make sure all the kinks were out of the thongs. Mag's blazing black eyes met the glint of Mrs. George's gray eyes. "You won't go?"

Mag's eyes glittered, but she saw something that made her afraid. Mrs. George had fought Indians, had ridden with her men to chase and hang horse thieves, had lashed the faces of bad men, had won and held the Arrowhead range. It showed in her face. Mag's glare

wavered. "We'll go," she mumbled, dropped her face, sat still.

"Make a start!"

Mag got off the chair, not looking up. " 'Tain't right!" She dragged her feet, muttered. "We're goin' have justice, some kind!" Slowly she climbed the stairs.

Mrs. George turned on Huskins. "How'd you come to move in here in the first place?"

Huskins cringed, dabbed dirty fingers at the blood on his face, looked as if about to cry. "Some time back, Joe Bush thar in town he said 'twould be a'right. So I brung my fam'ly—"

"Be out of here by sundown, Huskins. Unless every hair, hide and hoof is off the place, I'll have my boys take you off at the end of a rope! Git goin'!"

Huskins wiped at his face with a forearm. "Y-yes'm," he said. He turned to the stairs, plodded up.

Mrs. George turned on Red. A corner of her mouth twitched, not quite smiling. "You, shame on you! You hit a woman!"

Red grinned sheepishly. "If she'd wore pants I wouldn't 've!"

"Get outside and find that young Huskins. Tell him to get his horses and start hitching!"

RED had his knee cocked over the saddle horn and from horseback, as he rolled a cigarette, gave the young Huskins a talk on manners. 'Peared like, according to Red, when spoke to you ought to answer, prompt and polite, not hide away in a crib until come on.

Slim Hawks dashed out of the back of the house, saw Red and came toward him in a lurching trot with long arms flapping.

"Hey, Red, lis'n!" Hawks blurted and flung back a hand, pointing. "Sheriff's comin' up the road! Miz George says f'r you to light out f'r the ranch, ears a-floppin'!"

"Who all is with 'im?"

"Jest him. Miz George says f'r to tell you to vamose, sorta hide yourself in dust."

Red shook his head. "I ain't going. How you know he's lookin' for me? Maybe as how he just rode out to sweat off some fat. Then how'd I look to run?"

"But Miz George says—"

"What she says about work, any time, I'll do. What she says about my personal 'fairs 'tween me and sheriffs—hell, Bill Nims wouldn't shoot me! He knows I wouldn't shoot him. So neither of us is scairt."

Bill Nims fitted a saddle as if shoe horned into it and rode big horses. He moved with a big man's slowness, but wasn't awkward. He had been passing, saw the buckboard, dogs, and recognized Mrs. Dobbs' horse; and so turned in.

Mrs. George, looking stern, came out of the doorway. Nims pulled off his hat.

"Howdy, Miz George."

"Howdy, Bill."

He turned his big round face from side to side. "Something goin' on?"

"Something, a little. Get down and come here."

He swung from his horse, kept hold of the reins, walked forward with the horse stretching its neck in mild protest at being led up under the porch.

Mrs. George's gloved hand, with quirt dangling, pointed through the doorway at the spread hide. "Looky there!"

Sheriff Nims studied the brand. "Bad." His deep voice had full sympathy. Tug Huskins' howls grew louder. The sheriff cocked his head.

"Dogs jumped Tug," said Mrs. George.

The sheriff pondered. "Um-hum. I reckon the lot of 'em 'll get ten years apiece for this."

Mrs. George's words exploded between her teeth. "They steal my cows, then I pay taxes for ten years to feed, bed, and clothe Huskinses!"

The sheriff didn't want an argument,

not with her. He said mildly, "That there is the law."

"I've showed respect a-plenty for the law by not hanging 'em. They got to git up and git!"

"And maybe steal somebody else's cows?"

"Other somebodys can look after their own cows." She gave him a curious stare. "Has Judge Harris spoke to you the last day or two about me?"

"Why, no ma'am, Miz George." He waited, expectant.

Mrs. George said, "Humphf." Then, "How'd you come to be coming along?"

"Oh, I was just takin' a little ride out your way. Red to home?"

"What you want with Red?"

"Do you mean you don't know what he done there in town?"

"Yes, I know. And," Mrs. George snapped, "I think he done right. Some ways, Bill Nims, you are a mighty big fool! One of 'em is to think you could come out to my ranch and arrest Red!"

The sheriff cleared his throat, moved his feet, wiped his face. He smiled uneasily. "Whew. Hot today, ain't it?" He moved back from the doorway, faced about.

Red, on horseback, said, "Mornin', sheriff."

The sheriff eyed him, slow and searching. Mrs. George swished the quirt and by her look Red could tell that she was giving him Hail Columbia. Nims put his hat brim into the same hand that held the reins. He put the other hand high up against the post, leaned slightly. "Mornin', Red."

"Kinda hot, sheriff."

"Yes, 'tis a little, Red." The sheriff stared up at the lank sun-burned lean-faced boy, range-born and bred, whose look was steady as sunlight through a knot hole. "When you was a little shaver, Red, I ust to set you astraddle of my horse's neck in front of my saddle. And now—" The sheriff straightened, slowly put a hand down inside his vest pocket, drew out a folded sheet of glazed paper. He waggled his arm, shaking the paper open, stepped forward, held it up.

Red took the poster.

$1000 Dead or Alive $1000

William Tyler Clark, Alias Red

Red gave it a glance, not more, then his eyes warily left the paper and steadily watched the sheriff. No one spoke for a time, and there was no movement. Then Red, mild and slow, asked—

"Was you thinking some, maybe, of arrestin' me?"

"I come for a talk. Looks mighty bad for the son of Sheriff Clark to be on the dodge, don't you think?"

"He's been on the dodge a time or two a'ready, sheriff. And ever'thing come out all right." Red gave the poster another quick glance, eyed the sheriff:

"Since when do you call shootin' in self defense 'murder', sheriff?"

"Self defense has to be 'stablished in court, Red," said the sheriff, as grave and judicial as if he were a judge.

Mrs. George said, "Bill Nims!" She took a step toward him, seemed to grow taller. Her gloved fingers bent up the brim of her hat with sudden jerk.

The sheriff straightened bulkily, put on his hat.

"Bill, some ways I've always liked you a heap. You've got faults a-plenty. But ain't afraid of no man alive. There's no man I know of that goes farther than you just out of goodness of heart to help some poor body. But you are being a damn fool, Bill."

The sheriff flinched as if that quirt had swept at his face. His face turned as red as the bandanna about his neck. He choked a little in pleading, "Miz George!"

"Left to yourself, you wouldn't lift a hand to arrest Red! Would you? For one thing, you know he done right. But I'll bet them Johnsons have told you to fetch Red in. So wanting to obey them

Johnsons, and not wanting to rile us cowmen by trying to arrest Red forcibly, you got the notion of riding out here to try to coax Red to go to town of his own free will and have a trial. He ain't going!"

"You ortn't to talk like that to—"

Mrs. George pounded her fist against the gloved palm.

"And let me tell you something else, Bill! Folks of all kinds from all sides are crowding me. But you, the sheriff, you ain't lifting your hands to help no cowman these days—'cept them Johnson's foreclosing mortgages! So—"

"But there is the law, Miz George," he pleaded, "and—"

"Do you think I'm going to law to keep off sheep? And rustlers? And nesters that eat my beef? And horse thieves? And cowmen that are drifting their herds onto my grass? No, by God! I'm going to hold my range with guns and men! Now you can climb your horse and start for town. I'm coming right along in after you to tell folks there just exactly what I've told you!"

Mrs. George flipped her hand. The gesture told him to get on horseback. It was very much as if she were firing a puncher, sending him off the ranch.

The sheriff was dripping sweat. He tried to glare at Mrs. George but her bright gray eyes were too hot for him. He mopped his neck with the bandanna, opened and closed his mouth, hesitated for a time as if about to say something as he looked up at Red, who sat solemn faced, feeling a little sorry for Bill Nims. Then the sheriff climbed heavily into the saddle, reined about, heading for town.

IT WAS past afternoon when Red jogged back to the ranch with the dogs following him. He went up to the house, watered and fed his horse, took off the saddle, hung it up on a peg in the open shed. He fed the dogs from a tub of beef scraps. After that he went into the kitchen, had a drink, took a pie out of the pantry and planted himself at a small table.

The stately 'Nita was awakened from her siesta by the rummaging and came in, calm eyed and slow. She saw what he was eating and said in Spanish, "You are still as much a child as when I was a maiden and loved you." She brought him a big mug of cold coffee and the sugar bowl.

'Nita has daughters as old as Red. He had pulled their hair and they had scratched his face when babies. He still at times pulled their hair.

Catherine was waiting for him in the patio and called as he started through without seeing her, "Where is Hal?"

"He went on into town with Miz George."

"To town!"

Red squirmed a little, hitched up his belt, took a lot of pains with a cigarette. He wanted to tell her that Mrs. George was on to their little trick of pretending to be strangers, but he felt that wouldn't be quite fair to Mrs. George. Tattle-taling wasn't much in Red's line. He shook out the match, broke the stick.

"Listen, Miss Kate, you just forget about last night."

"He was drunk! Oogh." She looked down, twisted her fingers.

"Aw, he was all wore out. Me, I'll go get drunk if you want and show you how a feller really acts."

"You," said Catherine coldly, "aren't being in the least amusing."

Red shrugged his shoulders and went with rattling drag of spurs to visit Bella and the pups.

That night Red borrowed ten dollars from Jeb Grimes and rode 'cross country to a Mexican wedding. He was the only gringo there and welcome. He drank much wine, danced all night, lost the ten dollars at monte, and in the dawn rode back, asleep in the saddle.

He swiped a dozen eggs from 'Nita's crock—she never would fix eggs to suit

him—and took them down to the bunkhouse. Joey fried them. The other boys had breakfasted long before. The eggs came out of the skillet looking like burnt flapjacks, and were tough as leather; or, as Red thought, just right. He and Joey ate the dozen. Also he had a steak, stewed apples, and nearly a quart of hot coffee, strong as horse liniment.

"Now," he said, stroking his belly, "I'm fit for a bad job I got on my hands today. 'F I ain't back this time tomorrow, Joey, tell Jeb and the boys to mosey over toward the Cross-Box and poke around in the brush. Maybe I'll have fell off and sprained an ankle."

Red took Timton's wadded note from his pocket, unfolded the paper that tore along the creases. He spread it out on the table, reread the scrawl. "Windy and 'Gene?" he said to himself. "I don't wanta believe it, but I'll go have me a look." He lifted a lid of the cook stove and dropped the note into the fire.

CHAPTER VII

DOUBLE BRANDIN' CROSS-BOXES

RED rode out into the pasture, huddled the gray he wanted into a bunch, chased the bunch into the corral. On foot, he looped his rope, eyed a skittish mare, threw—and the loop settled over the head of the powerful gray.

"Fooled you!" said Red, half hitching the rope to the snubbing post.

He ran the other horses out and set about saddling The Ghost. Red cussed fluently in a soothing tone. He always talked to horses when working with them, but not wanting to sound silly if overheard, said things that would have shocked a mule skinner.

When he climbed in the saddle The Ghost pitched a little, but not much. As the horse settled down, Red stroked its neck.

"Feller, sometime when you been up all night dancing, I'll remember your kindness."

Red stopped at the bunkhouse, ran a ramrod through his rifle to poke out the grease, put the scabbard under his leg and struck out for the hills.

The horse didn't know the way so Red had to stay awake. He whistled some but Yankee Doodle was the only tune he could hit on with certainty. He sang a little to entertain himself and The Ghost put back his ears in protest.

Red pushed on, keeping off the ridges that would have shown the horse against the skyline. He was sure that somewhere out there, somebody probably with field glasses, was pretty likely to be keeping a lookout. Along in the middle of the afternoon he began to get into the timber, then turned sharply, working his way up through rough country. Twice he saw deer nosing him. To one he said, "Smart, ain't you? Know I don't dare make a racket. Some day," he promised, "I'll come back along up here and skin you for that!"

In his short-legged days when it took two jumps to get saddle-high, Red had hunted all over these hills. He rounded the rocky ridge of a hogback and worked back down slowly toward the edge of the timber. Soon he reined up with ears cocked.

From far off he could hear the bellering of a cow. It told of pain and indignation. He went on, walking his horse.

Soon he got off, tied the horse and crept forward to the edge of a bluff rock ledge, took off his hat, poked his head, Indian fashion, into a bush and looked down on to the cabin and stake fence across the box canyon that made a pasture for the little Cross-Box outfit. He could see two men, so far off they looked about the size of mice, working by a branding fire on a hogtied cow.

"Nice," Red murmured grimly. "Folks is to home."

He went back to his horse, hung his spurs on the horn, pulled the rifle from the scabbard, and worked his way down a deer trail on foot. He got up close to the fence and snuggled down with an eye to a wide crack.

The men were not far from the gate made of poles laid length-wise. They had a little pile of chips and sticks for their fire. They took a long time over the branding as was needful if they wanted to do the wrong sort of work in the right way, and changed irons two or three times.

When they were ready to turn the cow loose, one man hurried and got on his horse. A full grown cow was mighty likely to charge a man on foot after it had been branded and might have to be thrown; but this cow ran off with tail high and bellered loud.

Both men, from horseback, then put their ropes on another cow and by half-dragging, quirting her rump, pull-hauling, they got her up near the fire before throwing her. The cow had to be thrown close up to the fire or it would make a long way to trot back and forth with the running iron.

The punchers seemed enjoying themselves, laughed some and made funny remarks. Red scrouged along the fence until he got to the gate, cocked his rifle and stood up. He wasn't noticed and waited a minute or two; then sung out:

"Mighty hot day for to be playin' with fire!"

The two punchers jerked up their heads, then bounced to their feet. The cow, feeling the weight off her head, heaved her body, but couldn't rise. She bellowed and threshed with bound legs.

"Gosh a'mighty," Red told them, "do I have to say *pul-ease?*"

At that, both boys slowly crooked their arms upwards and the smaller one called, "Well, if it ain't ol' Red!"

"Yeah. And I never knowed you liked so well to work, Windy!"

"You can see for yerself what a mistake it's been!"

"An' 'Gene, there! Why, damn both your onery souls! Don't us Dobbses burn our cows in a way that suits you?"

They eyed Red sheepishly.

Red went on. "Now, let's not have any more hard feelin' than can be helped. But this is business. So, Windy, you first! Use your left hand, unbuckle that belt and let 'er fall!"

Windy did. The belt fell, but the holster was tied low down on his leg. The gun spilled to the ground. Red wore his own holsters tied down, but he didn't think it a good sign in Windy and 'Gene. Bad men usually rigged their holsters that way.

"I'm 'sprised at you, Windy. Since when have you got to splittin' seconds when you reach for a gun?"

"It flops around in the way, rasslin' cows," said Windy, apologetic.

"Now, 'Gene, you shed your gun."

When the gun fell, Red added, "Windy, take some rope and tie 'Gene's arms up behind him. Do it good."

"Aw, Red," Windy coaxed, "ain't our word good?"

Red kept the rifle balanced across a pole of the gate. "Not when you been lyin' like hell with that brandin' iron!"

Windy looked humbled and worked with the rope. "He's tied, Red."

"And if you've tied it so he can make a break, it'll be your blame if 'Gene gets hurt."

Windy touched the knots, tightening. "He is tied good. Honest."

"Now take some more rope, fit your wrists behind you in a little loop, then waltz over here to me."

"You make a feller tie hisself up!"

"Don't argy. I was to a dance last night and am sort' not in a good humor."

Windy made a small loop, fitted his wrists into it behind him, trailed the rope over to Red, turned and backed up.

Red pulled the rope, then put the rifle down and tied Windy's arms.

"Set down here in the shade, Windy, and rest yourself."

Windy leaned against the fence stakes and slid down. Red made the rope fast to a stake. Then he had 'Gene come over and examined the knots. He made 'Gene sit down about twenty feet from Windy and be tied to a stake.

Red went to the cow, sat on its head, leaned far back and examined the brand. Jim Cross, 'Gene's uncle, had taken advantage of his brand, a cross in a box, to work over Mrs. Dobbs' Arrowhead into a pretty good resemblance of the Cross-Box. Red cut the cow loose, put one hand on the butt of a revolver, flapped his hat at her. Had she charged he would have shot. The cow jumped away, swinging her head far back, trying to get her tongue to where she was burned.

Red went back and squatted down, facing them, and began a cigarette.

'Gene said, peevish, "I bet it was old Rim Cramer that put you on to us. I seen him sometime back eyin' the brand, nosy-like, down Monohela way. Wasn't it him?"

"Huh. I come back in the hills today over trails I used for hunting as a kid, heard a cow bellerin', poked around and smelt burnt hide." He was pretty sure that they were fretting with wonder as to how he had got back in the hills without being seen by somebody, most likely Jim Cross himself.

Windy said, "Aw, Red, these ain't your cows. And we have had some good times together!"

Red walked over, stuck the cigarette in Windy's mouth, scratched a match. "If they was my cows, I'd give you two my best-sized cussin' and put you to ridin' for me till wages made up for 'em." He began another cigarette, spoke thoughtfully: "Runnin' 'em down to Monohela butchers, hm? That means you sold 'em cheaper than fellows that could steal near-at-hand Hepple cows, hm? The which means you trailed 'em across Hepple range, too, don't it? The which means the Hepples knowed what you was doin' and let you. Most likely they was some encouragin'!" Red looked up, gave 'Gene an accusing stare.

'Gene stared sullenly at the ground, not answering.

"Aw, Red," said Windy, trying to be cheerful and change the subject, "it was just a purty girl as is to blame!"

Red sniffed, skeptical. Windy was a chunky little runt of a fellow with a turned-up nose and sparkling eyes.

"Yep. You see, 'Gene wants to marry 'er. She won't do it even to him, so I knowed if she wouldn't marry a handsome feller like him, they wasn't no hope for me. We both felt so bad we turned rustler to hide our sorror."

Red poked a cigarette at 'Gene. "Open your potato catcher."

'Gene was slender, good looking, dark haired. A good kid in days passed but never so frank and open-hearted as Windy. Now there was a sort of mean streak that seemed to have worked through the skin since Red had last seen him and was showing on his face. He thrust out his head toward the match, inhaled.

"You know 'er, Red," 'Gene said with some trace of suspicion in his voice. "Sara Timton. She told me about you meetin' them Johnsons that day."

Red squatted down and rolled a cigarette for himself. "So you pair of idjits have, in a way of speakin', been rustlin' cows for Joe Bush, hm? Losing money at his table for to make her smile?"

"That's about the size of it," Windy agreed cheerfully.

"Um-hm," Red went on, "an' maybe Bush he sorta hinted that Hepples wouldn't object over-much if you snuck change-branded cows 'cross their range down to Monohela?"

'Gene asked, "How do you 'pear to know — I mean *think* you know so

much?" He looked purt-near mad. "Have you been goin' to see Sara?"

"I go to the Best Bet. Not to see her. Things is changed now some in town, a little, I reckon. Joe Bush he got killed."

"Who done it?" said Windy, as if almost glad.

"Who done it?" asked 'Gene as if he wasn't glad.

"Oh, a fool cowboy that Bush throwed a knife at." Casually, "Jim Cross around some'eres?"

Windy tilted back his head, studying the sky, not answering. 'Gene said, "I sorta forget who is around the place today."

"Suits me," Red told them. "He'll be riding in sooner or later."

Windy spoke up, earnest. "Say, Red, I'm sure glad 'twas you and not ol' Jeb Grimes as walked in on us!"

"Jeb has him a habit of not taking pris'ners, and that's a fact," Red agreed.

He walked over and picked up their revolvers, poked out the cartridges, tossed the guns aside, rolled each another cigarette, took his rifle and sat down by the gate where he could watch the road up to the cabin. "You boys can take a little snooze."

Red waited a long time. He heard the drumming of hoofs and cocked his head. It was beginning to grow late. Shadows had lengthened. A rider came up through the scrub oaks. Red squatted with rifle lowered.

Windy's voice rose in the stillness. "Lookout, Jim! We're caught! *Run!*"

"You've played hell, right!" said Red and jumped up with a shout: "Pile off that horse, Cross!"

Jim Cross was about a hundred yards off, or a little more. With high lift of arm he jerked his horse to its haunches, setting it back so low the stirrups were almost scraping the ground. The case of field glasses flopped at his side. The horse threw its head high and back. Cross was carrying a rifle across his left arm. He swung it over and fired as if it were a revolver. The bullet splattered chips from the gate post about Red's head. Cross swing at the reins, swerving the horse as he kicked the spurs deep.

Red pulled down on him, fired. Cross reeled back, flinging hands and rifle into the air and slid backwards out of the saddle as the horse plunged into a clattering gallop.

"Is Jim dead?" 'Gene cried out. Then, "Jim! Oh, Jim!"

"He was a good feller," said Windy, sober.

"Now I got to leave you two fellers here a while," Red told them. "An' I'm going to make plumb good and sure you are here when I come back."

Red tied a sung loop about the neck of each. The loop encircled the stake behind, with the knot outside. He emptied their pockets, tossing away pocket knives. If they did manage to get their hands free they couldn't get at the knot outside the fence that held their necks.

He let down the poles of the gate, led out Windy's horse and while putting the poles up, said, "I'll be back soon. You can sing if you want. The dancin', it may come later."

Red walked over to Jim Cross, gave him a look, then rode off.

It was well past sundown when he came back, jogging through the darkness, leading The Ghost and Jim Cross' horse.

He watered and fed the horses first. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, and didn't now; but simply took a drink, then carried a dipper full to each of the boys.

He got a lantern, hobbled 'Gene and Windy so they wouldn't make a break for the bushes, and kept well back beyond reach so they wouldn't make a sudden jump at him. Under the light of the lantern, hung low in a tree, he made them put Jim Cross' body over his saddle and tie it on.

Red told them, sober and earnest,

"Now, boys, don't make me have to shoot 'cause sure as God makes big potaters out of little uns, I will." Then he put Windy on a horse, hobbled his feet under the horse's belly, tied his hands behind him. He did the same with 'Gene, but worked more cautiously because he trusted 'Gene less. He took the bridles off the horses and fastened the lead rope of Cross' horse to 'Gene's saddle, that of 'Gene's to Windy's horn, that of Windy's to his own.

"Be slow going but we got all night," he told them. Then the small caravan set out at a walk in the starlight for the Dobbs' ranch.

THEY poked along all through the night, so it was after daybreak when they got in.

Four or five men were standing about with shiny fresh-washed faces and the streaks of the comb in their wet hair. The comb was chained to the trunk of a sycamore on which hung an old mirror. They were waiting for Joey to sing out, "Take it away!"

Joey, with drooping mustache a-flutter, came to the door but did not sing out. He flipped the ripped flour sack that he used as an apron up across his shoulder and ran out among the men that moved forward with unconscious half shuffle of feet as Red rode in, leading the string of horses with men, one dead, on them.

Robertson, the old range boss, now rheumatic, limped out well in front, pulled at his beard, swept his eyes along the horses and men. Red swung off stiffly. He was saddle-tired from riding slow and was dead for sleep. Old Robertson yanked hard at his beard and said in his creaky sharp voice:

"Cross-Box, eh? Horses or cows?"

"Cows," said Red. "I left changed brands in the box canyon pasture."

Robertson glared piercingly at Windy, then at 'Gene. Both boys tried to stare back, but their eyes fell. Rheumatic pains and the anger of not being able to set a saddle has made the old foreman's temper ugly as a teased rattler's. He snapped, "Red, why ain't they belly down, too, 'cross their hosses?"

Red threw out his arms in a tired careless gesture. "That's just why I rode over there myself, alone, instead of lettin' you send somebody—"

His glance searched out the lank dark face of Jeb Grimes, then looked at wrinkled old Harry Paloo. Red's eyes fell on another face: the bony cheeks and bright glazed eyes of that broad-shouldered Buck whom he had met by the stage there in town.

"—Somebody," he went on, "as never borrowed their last dollar or slept in their blankets, with them in 'em!"

A little later, getting close to Robertson, Red said defiantly:

"I brung 'em in. Now I hope to God they get away!"

Robertson growled. In a way he didn't have much liking for Red, who was impudent and bad-spoiled by Mrs. George. "Oh, you do, heh? Then why didn't you let 'em?"

" 'F you ever bite yourself, Mr. Robertson, snake-bite cure won't help none! Who's that puncher in store clothes?"

"Him? Name's Buck. Grub linin', so he says. 'Sall I know. Come yest'd'y askin' for work."

"Get it?"

"No. Times like these I don't want strangers in the saddle."

Red hung his guns at the head of his bunk, then he and the prisoners washed up, marched in and sat down on the same bench at breakfast. Little was said. It was Robertson's lookout to how the kid rustlers were guarded.

After breakfast Red dug up a package of tobacco for them, told Joey to wake him the very first minute Mrs. George got home from town, and piled into his bunk.

When he awakened it was dark, supper was long since over. Red went into the kitchen to give Joey a cussing.

"But she ain't home yet," said the cook.

"Then you're forgiven if you give me something to eat. Anything—long as it's plenty. Where's Windy and 'Gene?"

"In the shed back of the blacksmith shop."

Red grunted, not pleased but not complaining. Robertson didn't think rustlers good enough for cowboy bunks.

"That store clothes cowboy still around, Joey?"

"Dunno. He et supper."

The fire was out in the kitchen stove. Red ate a heaping plate of the chopped cold boiled potatoes, heavy with sage, onions, steak, that Joey had fixed to fry in the morning as hash; and he drank much cold coffee.

Joey was poring over an old matrimonial sheet. Such advertised offers of marriage, from widows mostly, fascinated the squirrel-faced cook. He said, turning over his paper, "Jeb and Harry Paloo, they lit out for the Cross-Box to bring in them cows. You done foolish to do that alone, Red."

Red tipped back his chair, yawned, sleep-loggy. He leaned far back, stretching his arms, turning his head slowly. As his eyes crossed the kitchen window his body grew rigid.

A hazily seen face peered through a lower corner of the pane with a revolver's muzzle moving into line. Red's yawn-stretched left arm swept the light over and off the table with a crash as he sent his tipped chair over, falling backwards to the floor, just as the gun roared through the window, shattering glass, throwing a lightning-like flash of flame.

Joey went off his chair with a yell, landed on the floor, scrambled like a broken-backed dog and was still.

Red lay as he fell, not stirring. He was unarmed, never wearing guns around the bunkhouse.

A voice called through the broken pane, eager and pleased: "That evens us, you—"

The man was so sure of his marksmanship that he misguessed why Red went over in the chair, so nearly were fall and shot simultaneous.

A moment later there was a clatter of hoofs, and a yell, challenging and defiant, long-drawn, piercing as a wolf's howl.

Red picked himself up slowly, rubbed at an elbow, called, "Joey?" No answer. Red struck a match, lighted the high bracket lamp on the wall over the stove. Joey was behind the stove, wedged in. He backed out, stammered in whispers, "W-what h-happened?" His walrus mustache looked frayed at the ends.

"Somebody don't like your cookin'," said Red as he turned, solemnly perplexed and went across to the shattered pane, eyed it, trying to think.

A couple of men came running. One was Dutchy, the crippled blacksmith. "Vot happen, heh?" The other, a young bronco buster. "Who shot? What happened?"

Red eyed them, nodded, grinned in a wry way. "Go look! If us galoots ain't all afoot, I miss my guess!"

"But why'd he shoot at you?"

"You heard what he said, Joey?" Red asked.

Joey denied having heard anything but the shot. All else was a blank.

"It's all your bad cookin'," Red affirmed, trying to figure out why that store clothes cowboy had pulled down on him. For that $1,000 reward? Maybe, but why then, "That evens us, you—"?

Perry and Dutchy had gone to look. Red soon heard plaintive cussing as they came back, old Robertson with them.

A weather-beaten, pain-marked,

shrewd honest fellow, Robertson; also savage. He stamped into the kitchen in spite of rheumatism, said shrilly:

"Windy and 'Gene is gone! And they ain't—"

Red broke in, finished the sentence: "—A horse left within a mile! The hell-bendin' Dobbses, terrors of the range, left helpless, flat afoot! That store clothes cowboy has carried off our rustlers, run off our horses, scairt our cook purt-near to—oh, hell!" He laughed, amused, not happy.

"Why'd he shoot at you?" Robertson demanded, almost accusing.

"I'm cur'us for to know. He sung out, 'That evens us!' Funny, 'cause he was nice enough there in town when I met 'im."

"Maype he vas a frien' ob dot Cho Push," Dutchy guessed.

Young Perry suggested, "Maybe he'd had a run-in with your dad, times gone by, Red. Thought to get even."

"I reckon," Red agreed, but whether with Dutchy or Perry he didn't say.

The mysterious Buck had worked it slick, like one who had done the same thing before. He had first stolen a couple of horses and saddles and led them quietly off into the shadows. He had run the kept-up horses out of the corral into the pasture, leaving, as Red had guessed, the Dobbses all flat afoot. After that, he had held up the Mexican Sanzo who was keeping watch over Windy and 'Gene, then knocked him over the head with a gun barrel and sent the rustlers on out to the waiting horses. He came to the bunkhouse, looking for Red and found him yawning in the kitchen.

"You told me as how you hoped they'd get away!" Robertson yelled, right up close to Red's face. "I hope you're happy! Sanzo is purt-near dead. May die. You—you ain't got a lick o' sense!"

He went out, limping and fuming.

IT WAS about twenty-four hours later that Mrs. George, miles ahead of the buckboard, got home from town. She didn't give the dogs a cheery word as they leaped about her stirrups. When she got off she struck at them with half idle swing of quirt for crowding about her legs and making her stumble as she started on to the veranda.

It was a starlit night. She stopped short, jerked up her head. Some one was standing in the shadows of the porch, not hiding, but partly hidden. It looked like Red—so much like Red that she called out sharply, faintly incredulous:

"Red?"

"Why, yes'm, sure."

Mrs. George came close. Her eyes were fixed in a hard look, anxious and doubtful. She reached out and touched him almost as if not quite sure that he was there. She grabbed him with sudden jerk, shook him, and began to laugh. The dogs, encouraged by her laughter, crowded near, rose up and pawed with mouths open as if laughing, too.

Red said, "You act sorta funny."

"Funny? I don't believe in ghosts, but for weeks after Dobbs died I seemed to see him at times. It was just wanting to see him, I suppose. And you—why a fellow named Buck there in town that claims he shot you in a quarrel here at the ranch. Wants to be paid that $1,000! So I hear. I didn't lay eyes on the fellow. Oh, Red. I must like you an awful lot from the way I have been feeling!"

"That feller bragged some too soon, a little. It happened this away. I'd been over to the Cross-Box. . . ."

"Jim Cross! And Windy? And Gene?" Mrs. George was hurt and angered. She flung quirt, gloves and hat at a chair and dropped heavily on to the swing. "No doubt of it, Red. You have figured right. They wouldn't have done it if the Hepples hadn't encouraged 'em. And I purt-near believe you're right, too, in

thinking Mrs. Hepple wouldn't start trouble with me unless the Johnsons nudged her into it!"

"—And," Red finished, "we had one hell of a time catching horses afoot out there in the pasture this morning!"

Mrs. George rested her elbows on her knees, lifted her head, looked across at him. "Red, all my life I've had to fight like hell. I've won out because I had men like you, Jeb Grimes, Harry Paloo, Hawks and Robertson behind me. I've still got 'em, thank God!" She laughed with sudden sharpness. "Be like old times again! I won't knuckle under to their damned Law and Order. I'll raise hell and keep on raising hell till the Government sends in troops. How'll you like that?"

Red grinned. "I bet nearly all the old time cowmen'll chip in and help you, too. If ever anything like we think they're doin' can be proved on them Johnsons, they'll look nice danglin' to a rope over a cottonwood limb!"

Mrs. George tossed up her hands and lay back, drew up her feet, snuggled against the cushions of the couch. In the shadowed lamplight she seemed younger, almost gay. "Bring me a drink, Red. Tell 'Nita to fix me a snack. Tell her to tell Kate there is company coming. Have something to eat ready." She rolled a cigarette, held the match after shaking it out. "Windy and 'Gene? And I once liked those boys." She tossed the match away.

Red fetched the drink. Mrs. George emptied the glass, gave it back to him to put down. "Dora Harris is coming. She is a beauty, Red. I like her. I told Slim to drive slow so she and Mr. Harold Mason could talk."

"You think maybe he'll like her?"

"I know men! Why, even Dobbs was human. And I always thought the first Mrs. Hepple an awful fool for packing up and getting out with that young un. You don't hold a man or horse by cutting him loose to be roped by a rustler!"

She ate the snack 'Nita brought, had another drink or two, then said she would go in and freshen up a bit before the company arrived.

Red sat and thought. Pretty soon the collies stirred, barked a time or two, and started off down the road. How they knew it was the ranch wagon was more than Red could figure but there was a certain something in their barking that said so. The buckboard climbed slowly. The horses were tired.

Red took his horse and walked off into the shadows, squatted down.

Mrs. George came hurrying out and Catherine, not looking eager, was with her to welcome the company. Hawks drawled, "Whoa-up!" Mr. Mason got out, then Harris' niece. Red could see only blotches of silhouette as figures moved against the lamplight on the veranda. He could hear voices dimly, not words. Catherine and the Harris girl shook hands. Slim Hawks set some bags down on the veranda. He made a gaunt angular shadow-figure and jerked his head aside to spit before giving heed to something Mrs. George was saying to him in a gay manner. Hawks wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and pushed his hat up almost off his head. Red couldn't hear but he knew Hawks was saying joyfully, "I'll be damned!" He climbed on the seat, shook the reins and began to sing, soft.

Red, walking his horse, cut down hill, got on the road and stopped, blocking the way. "'Lo, Slim?"

Hawks pulled up. "'Lo, you damn ghost!"

Red got out of the saddle and climbed on the seat, holding his bridle reins. "Don't try to make out you are fat. Move over. The edge of a sliver is plenty of room for you to set on."

"I got a bottle I nussed careful alongside of me."

"Who give it to you?"

"Jim in the Best Bet."

"Did you take off your gun?"

"Miz George she said to. Awso, I got somepin f'r you. A letter with nice smellum on it." Hawks pulled an envelope from inside his shirt, and held it first to his nose, then to Red's. "Smell."

"For me?" Red took it. "Who from?"

"That Sara girl. I promised not to tell nobody."

"Why'd she write me a letter if she thought I was dead? One look at you and anybody could know you ain't goin' when you die to where I am."

"She give it to me day 'fore yest'd'y. It was a'ready wrote an' she was waitin' f'r some handsome feller like me to come along from the ranch. An' I hope when I die I don't go to where you are. I don't like sulpher smell!"

Red didn't want the fellows to see him reading a letter, especially one with perfume on it, so he took a piece of candle and went to the blacksmith shop. The envelope was pink and smelled strong. The paper was pink and the writing in pencil.

> Dere Red It was awful swete of you to shot Jo Bush on acount of me. I hop to return the faver sometim. The other gamlers you shot neded it to. I am writin to say you had beter lookout. I here tell that feler Buck is mad at you an he has ben talkin some a lot to them Jonsons an that Mix Hepel. I dont want you to git hurt nor for eny body to git that reword that they hav got postered up for you. I shore dont. Pleas beleve Im awful gratefull. Yur true frend Sara.

Red sniffed the paper. It had a smell a little like the soap Catherine used on the poodle, but was much stronger. Very pleasant, Red thought. He read the letter again, then held it to the candle, burning it. If the letter had come sooner, Buck might have been one surprised *hombre* before he rode off the ranch.

Thinking it over, Red decided that Sara was a mighty nice girl, after all.

CHAPTER VIII

OF THE ENEMY'S BLOOD

THE next morning Red had The Ghost over to the blacksmith shop where the crippled Dutchy, with thick arms bare, a big leather apron on his belly and a meerschaum pipe between his teeth, was nursing a hind foot in his lap and paring a hoof.

Hal Mason came sauntering up. He looked nervous, washed out and pretty much down at the mouth.

"Howdy," said Red.

"Good morning." Mason looked as if he wanted to say something but had forgot the words, as Red had seen kids do when reciting poetry at a church social. Mason stooped, picked up a stick, and began breaking off little bits, tossing each down near his foot as if playing a game by himself. His eyes wavered across Red's face as he asked, "I wonder if I can have a word with you?"

"Sure can. Go right ahead."

Mason looked at Dutchy. "I mean alone."

"Oh, that Dutchman don't understand English!" said Red, loud.

Dutchy goodhumoredly mumbled through clenched teeth, holding his pipe firm, that Red was a bow-legged liar. Mason was further warned to have nothing to do with him. The warning was in pretty thick English, as well as muffled by the pipe stem, and so unheeded.

Dutchy patiently waddled to his forge, plunged the shoe into the coals, pumped the bellows, took out the red hot iron, beat it with almost dainty blows, making slight changes. He soused the sizzling iron into a tub of black water, fitted the shoe.

"Some day," said Dutchy, "you ride him from men that want to hang you, den you tank me maype for doin' the job right." He called it "shob" and beamed, flapping his hand in dismissal.

Mason came close alongside of Red and they walked off together, the horse following with slow *clump, clump, clump* on the sandy ground.

"Where we won't be interrupted," said Mason uneasily.

"Matter?"

"Catherine has told me that she told you all about us. I mean that we are married."

"Oh, me, I been busy with one thing and another, but 'pears like I sorta remember."

"And *you* told Mrs. Dobbs!" Mason's look was accusing, but he kept his voice down, tense and strained as if afraid he would scream. His voice trembled. His hand was trembling, too. He looked nervous and angered, like a man a little scared but who means to go through with something unpleasant.

Red eyed him up and down with aloof insolence. Coolly, "Well, now, how'd you guess all that?"

"Then you admit it?"

Red's eyes narrowed with much the scrutinizing look of a fellow thinking about buying a horse from a dealer he doesn't trust.

Mason was a good looking young man, all right. Nothing wrong on the surface. A bit fat of face but he had straight eyes. What lay heart-deep hadn't yet been brought to view; and Red wondered some. Except for Miss Kate's interest in the fellow, Red would have made Mason's life miserable just on the principle that Easterners, like sheep, ought to stay off the range.

He thought things over and said, "Well, feller. Since you think I've told her, why don't you just waltz up to Mrs. Dobbs and say, 'Bein' as how now you know me an' Miss Kate is married'—something like that. See what happens. She'd have your hide nailed to the barn door 'fore you could say 'Jack Rob'son!"

"Well, I admit that I am a little afraid of the old lady."

"Of *who*?"

"Of Mrs. Dobbs," Mason corrected readily. "I didn't mean disrespect. She is a remarkable woman. But can you tell me why, if she doesn't know—*why* does she see to it that Catherine and I aren't alone together a minute?"

"Anything you want to know about cows and horses, I can purt-near tell you. Otherwise, I'm smartest when I don't talk about what I maybe don't know."

"Catherine says Mrs. Dobbs thinks more of you than anybody else on the ranch so I thought perhaps—"

"That I run an' blabbed to her, hn? Tattle-taled for to make her like me? Huh!"

"No, no, I—"

"Listen, you. She wouldn't give a bushel of me for one Jeb Grimes. The which shows her good sense. Come on, Spook." Red shook the halter, wanting to get away.

"But a minute, please. I am in a dreadful quandary and—"

"A what?"

"Mix-up. Muddle. I don't know what to do. Last night after everybody was asleep, I went to Catherine's room and we talked. Catherine thinks—do you think there will be a range war with the Hepples?"

"Hm?"

"A feud? Fights? Men killed?"

"Why you and Miss Kate frettin' so over them Hepples? Ever since she come, she's spoke up anxious-like about 'em. 'F you all wanta worry, worry about us handsome Dobbses gettin' hurt. Not them slabsided Hepples."

Mason turned red, looked down, stammered a little, hesitated, lifted his head. The words came out as if squeezed. "Catherine says that I must tell you. I am a Hepple. Harold Mason Hepple."

Red was rolling a cigarette. His fingers paused. His gaze lifted to the edge of his lowered hat brim. He said softly, "Keep a-talkin', feller!"

"Catherine says there is nobody else we can trust to—to help us!"

"You are old Dingley Hepple's boy?"

"Yes."

"An' married to Mrs. Dobbs' gran'-daughter!"

"Yes. My mother's people are Masons, and I took—"

"How you come to marry Miss Kate?"

"She is a friend of Col. Howland. So am I. We met through him. He knew all about this crazy feud. He approves of the marriage and—and when Mrs. Dobbs wrote Catherine to come here to the ranch, we had just been married. Col. Howland advised her to go and for me to come later, as I did."

Red finished his cigarette, taking much care. Across the cigarette as he wet the paper he again studied Mason's face and took a deep breath. "You all was afraid some, maybe, that Miz George wouldn't leave Miss Kate no money if she knew her gran'daughter was married to a Hepple, hm?"

"Well, in a way, why, yes." Mason was trying to hide a slight embarrassment under frankness. "There seemed no reason to throw away— She is very wealthy, isn't she?" He asked for confirmation, not facts.

"These days," Red told him, "no cowmen 'pears to have much money, 'cept your folks. Young Pinky, they say, is a spender. So's your step-maw. Do you expect to get anything when your dad dies?"

"Not that I know of. Or expect. Why?"

"Hm, just cur-us. Your dad, I hear tell, is mighty sick. Sorta crippled in the legs."

"I would like to see him. He was good to me. You can imagine how Catherine and I feel to hear Mrs. Dobbs abuse the Hepples and boast of—"

"If I was you," said Red, inhaling deep, "I'd do some imaginin' as to how poor old Miz George is going to feel when she learns!"

Mason asked, nervous and serious: "What do you think she will do?"

"I don't know. I won't try to guess. You see her lay her quirt on old Huskins. That was a sample of what she can do. Most near the first thing I can remember as a kid, no higher than to your knee, is seein' her throw her arms 'round old Jeb Grimes and kiss him square on the mouth! That, too, is a sample of what she liable to do if you please her a heap."

"What did he do?" Mason asked with a glimmer of hope.

"Well, sir," Red told him in a pleased voice, "Jeb he walked backwards with a rifle in his hands for about fifteen mile, picking you Hepples out of the saddle when you closed in. Jeb was leadin' a horse. John Dobbs, bad hurt, was tied on that horse."

Mason made a sound vaguely like a muffled groan and shuddered.

"I was just a little shaver them days, but I mind Jeb never twitched an eyebrow. He didn't like your folks then. He 'specially don't like 'em these days!"

Mason forced a smile. "It isn't pleasant to hear you talk that way of—of my family."

"Feller," said Red, without anger, just speaking plain, "it ain't pleasant to Dobbses for to know Ding Hepple's boy hopes some day to run this here ranch!"

"But, good God, Red, I have nothing to do with the feud!"

"And you hadn't better have—'cept as a Dobbs man ort! I wish you hadn't told me. I don't much dislike you personal. You called me *servant* that first night and I wanted to break your neck but—"

"I'm sorry. I was drinking. I am not used to drinking. I made an ass of myself all the way 'round." He smiled a little. "I don't know what you'll think of Miss Harris, either, when I tell you that she also is in love with a Hepple!"

Red grunted, "Pink?"

"Yes, Pinky, as you call him. She

and Pinky fell in love on first sight there in town."

Red dropped his cigarette, ground it with a toe. "I don't give a whoop in hell about who she loves, or don't. And I don't wish *you* no bad luck, special. But you'll have plenty if you don't hit the saddle and show some grit before Miz George finds out you and Miss Kate are married. When she finds out, too, that you are a Hepple. Gosh a'mighty, how I wish you hadn't told me! If I don't tell her, and she finds out I knowed all along, she'll skin me alive. 'F I do tell her, she'll skin you!"

"What on earth can I do to show Mrs. Dobbs that I have, as you call it, grit?" Mason asked, eager, but a little helpless.

"Can you shoot?"

"I have hunted squirrels and things."

"Can you ride?"

"I have ridden, some."

"Ever have any fights?"

"Only as a school boy."

"Win 'em?"

"Not all, no."

Red mused a little. "Tomorrow, early some fellows are ridin' over to Cocheno Valley to have a talk with some sheepherders. They don't want you along. But you might ask Miz George if you can go. More'n likely she'll say 'Yes.' You'll get saddle-sore and hungry. You'll maybe get shot. Them fellers was hired to fight, not herd sheep. A man was sent over to tell 'em to up an' git. They sent the man back with word to come an' put 'em off. Which only goes to show what damn fools sheepherders are!"

"I'll ask her," said Mason and set his jaw.

Red went on, stumbling on high heels, dragging the rowels, saying things to himself. He thought, "Howsomever, nobody ever called old Dingle Hepple a coward, so his boy ought to have some grit. My dad sorta half-way admired old Ding, so maybe I ain't doing so very wrong to give Ding's boy a chance to get hisself admired. But Miz George'll throw conniptions fits. She's got to remember how Dobbs was all crippled up by Hepple lead."

GRIZZLED old Robertson was giving young Perry, the bronco buster, hell. Perry stood red, helpless, and ashamed, slowly rubbing his shoulder. He had just been thrown by as pretty and well-built horse as was in the Dobbs herd.

Robertson yanked at his beard with one hand, shook his fist at Perry. "Bronco buster, you!" he snarled. "Best damn hoss—an' you let him throw you! You been hired to *ride* hosses, not make outlaws out of 'em! A hoss that ain't been rode gits it into his head and he can't be rode!" Robertson's leg hurt and he cussed a blue streak, flung out his arm. "Git yore duds an' git! You're fired!"

Young Perry went off, silent and rubbing his shoulder.

Robertson hobbled up to Red. "You, Red. Go pile on that Homer hoss an' ride 'im, you hear me? Ride 'im, gosh-blame-blankety-blank till there ain't a buck left in 'im! He's out thar now with his head up like he was about to crow!"

Red knew the horse, a powerful black. All the Homer strain were ferocious buckers. Red's sympathy was with Perry, who was a nice boy.

Busting broncos on a full stomach was a good way to get sea-sick, so Red passed up his dinner; and rode the horse. He got the worst shaking up he had had in years, knew he would be stiff and sore for maybe a week. He washed up, changed his clothes, and suddenly aware of hunger, went clattering into the kitchen.

Joey squatted on his haunches with a knife out at arm's length and was shedding tears into a pan of onions as he peeled. Red said, "You are too tender

hearted for to be a cook. So how about not letting me starve?"

Joey brushed at his long mustache tips with the back of a hand. "You've stole enough grub from me to know where it is. Whatever the hell has got into Perry, do you reckon?"

"Why?"

"He lit out just now with his warbag cross the horn. I called outa the winder at him, and he yelled back, 'To hell with this outfit. I'm goin' over an' ride for the Hepples!' "

LATE that afternoon a little Mexican kid came down and told Red the *señora* wanted to see him.

Red promptly roused himself off the bunk and began slipping on his boots. He was already sore and stiff and grumbled to old Harry Paloo, who gently strummed his guitar:

"I miss my dinner. Now I'm liable to miss my supper. 'F I was old and useless, like you galoots, I could set around and be over-fed."

Paloo, a mild old fellow, nodded, smiling in agreement. Red dusted his hat against his leg, tossed it on his head, reached for his guns. "Since that Buck feller, I don't trust even my shadder around here. Reckon I'm gettin' skittish—like you brittle-legged wore-out old cow-chasers."

Old Paloo hummed a love song, rolling back his head, looking at the ceiling. He was one of the best and quickest rifle shots in the country and his old hide was weighted with lead. Perhaps even now he was dreamily thinking of tomorrow, and sheepherders.

By way of dressing with care, since was company up to the house, Red slipped on an old vest, frayed at the back and all but one button off in front. That button never would come off. He had himself sewn it on with pack thread.

" 'F I felt any stiffer," Red commented, "I'd go steal Mr. Robertson's cane."

He went out with wide stiff-legged stride, clumping along as if on short stilts. In the corral he eyed the horses that were being kept up. "If you pitch," he told the horse as he saddled, "I'll bite you to death!"

He climbed into the saddle stiffly. Every joint seemed a-creak; but as soon as he was settled, familiarity and life-long habit overcame the stiffness.

Mrs. George was alone in the patio with the collies sprawled about near her. She had on a nice dress and slippers, but her feet were cocked up on the chair's seat before her. A bag of tobacco lay in her lap and she fiddled with the tag.

"You told Hal Mason about Cocheno Valley?"

"Um-hm."

"Why'd you put him up to wanting to go?"

"You said he wanted for to see the West, some."

Mrs. George smiled grimly. "Well, I'm telling Jeb to take him. If Jeb shoots *you,* don't blame me!"

"I never blamed you for nothin'. Never will."

"Nice speech, Red. Keep on, and you'll be a first-rate lady's man. You know, I think even Kate is beginning to wish Mr. Mason would top off a bronc like you did this afternoon, and shoot a couple of men. Why else would Mr. Mason suddenly feel inspired to go on a long hard ride to be shot at by sheepherders? By the way, you are staying up here for dinner."

"Aw, gosh a'mighty, Miz George. Let me go back to the bunkhouse. I'm hungry. I can't eat good before people."

"Shut up. Kate has been telling Dora you seem such a sweet gentle boy to be a terrible outlaw!"

Red fidgetted and itched. He swept a palm at his cowlick, twitched at his waist band, stood on one foot, then on the other, grinned and protested, "Aw,

don't!" Then, "I bet me you was nice at their age!"

"Me?" Mrs. George chuckled. "I was a skinny red-faced bad-tempered terror. I had every man in the country but John Dobbs scairt of me. Maybe that's why I loved him! Let's have a drink. Get the whiskey."

Red went into the kitchen, pulled one of the girl's hair and got slapped, not hard. He took a big spoon and raked some fried potatoes out of the skillet on to a plate and ate them rapidly with his fingers. He was hungry. 'Nita, not knowing he was staying for dinner, gave him the fried leg and thigh of a chicken while one of her daughters poured a big mug full of hot coffee and piled in sugar. He was eating as fast as he could, hurrying, when Mrs. George looked in.

She said, "Oh, that's what you're doing, eh? All right. But I thought you maybe had bolted." She came into the kitchen, held out her hand. "I'll take a gizzard myself."

One of the girls poked out two fried gizzards and offered them on a saucer. Mrs. George reached for the salt and ate with her fingers. "But let's have that drink." They had the drink. Mrs. George had another piece of chicken and some fried potatoes. She ate with her fingers, standing.

"Now, Red, we can eat dinner slow and finiky and them city folks will think we have got manners." She washed her hands and wiped them on a towel behind the door. "Come on. If I leave you here there won't be anything to put on the table."

At the table Red wondered if he oughtn't help a little somehow when he saw Mr. Mason hurrying to place the chairs for three ladies, all sitting down at the same time. The girls looked mighty pretty; and Mr. Mason looked funny in a black suit with long coat tails and a stiff white shirt front, big as a meat platter. Red fastened the lone button on his vest.

Red scarcely said a word. He noticed that Mr. Mason touched only the brim of a wine glass. From time to time Red caught Dora's velvet eyes looking at him as if she sort of liked him a little. He dropped his eyes, pleasantly embarrassed. Catherine, too, seemed trying to be nice to him. Red wondered if maybe he hadn't missed a lot by not being a lady's man.

After they had coffee on the patio and talked a little, Catherine said, "Please, Red, won't you take me for a little walk in the starlight?"

He didn't want Mason to feel bad, so he said, "Why you wanta go stumblin' round in the dark?" But of course he went and found out that he had been cat'spawed into a conspiracy. It had been arranged for Catherine to go off with him; later Mason and Dora would stroll out and meet them.

"Then Hal and I can be together," Catherine explained. "Alone."

He grunted, somehow feeling a little cheated; also very much aware of what Mrs. George's anger would be like if she ever found out he had been helping to fool her.

A half hour later as he walked away into the shadows with the graceful Dora Harris, Red felt nice and warm and a little silly. She held his arm with a kind of frank liking. The perfume she used was different than any he had smelled. There was a witching seductiveness about her that could very easily cause a man to make a fool of himself. He rather liked the sensation. His muscles ached and his joints creaked. Tomorrow would be another hard day. Damn dangerous day, too. He ought to have been in his bunk. But Dora was pretty, sweet, and gentle. It was nice.

They sat down on a flat rock. She took off his hat. "That's better. Now I can see his face." Her voice was soothing and low, like soft music.

"Red?"

"Yes'm."

"You ought to be awfully proud of yourself, Red."

"Me? Huh. What I done?"

"Everybody likes you so much. My uncle. And he really doesn't like many people! And Mrs. Dobbs. And Catherine. And Mr. Mason. You must be a nice boy!"

"Me? Oh, I am, sure. But they's one feller don't like me?"

"Who?"

"Pinky Hepple," Red blurted. "And is it so?"

"What, Red?"

"That you are in love with Pink?"

"You mean Charley Hepple?"

"Folks call him Pink."

"Yes, Red," she said, and put her hand on Red's arm, "I do love him. It was just one of those things that happen, like touching a match to powder. The moment I saw him!"

Red drew a big breath. "Um-m."

"Why, now even this dry hot dusty country seems beautiful."

" 'Tis!"

"I didn't think so at first. Do you know what it is to be in love, Red. Really in love?"

"Sure. It's like I feel toward Miz George!"

Dora patted his hand, as if approving. Then, "Why do you say Charley doesn't like you?"

"Joe Bush, for one thing. They was brothers."

"Oh, but he told me he had never, never approved of his brother, the gambler. That no one should judge him by the sort of man Joe Bush was."

Red set his teeth on edge to keep from swearing. Pinky was an awful liar, smooth and plausible, and he had denied his brother, the gambler, to make a better impression on this sweet, gentle girl. "Hm, how he come to say a thing like that?"

"Because uncle says Joe Bush needed killing."

"What Judge Harris think of Pinky?"

"Oh, he misunderstands him, Red. He thinks because Joe Bush—but Charley says all his life he has been blamed because of his brother! When I go back to town, we are going to run away and be married."

"Yeah?" Red understood. It was easy for folks, when they first met him, to think Pinky a nice boy. He smiled pleasant and looked honest; was handsome.

"You don't like him?" Dora said, softly reproachful.

"Me? I'm a Dobbs man, hair, hide and hoof."

"Then you ought to like him," Dora exclaimed, earnest and coaxing. "He is doing everything he can to prevent trouble between his ranch and Mrs. Dobbs. He told me so!"

Red said, "Huh," and let it go at that. Catherine and her husband were coming.

"We'll have to change partners again," said Mason. "And by the way, Red, I am going with you fellows in the morning." There was some pride in his voice. "Three o'clock, Mrs. Dobbs said." He looked at his watch, slanting the face to catch the starlight. "Nearly ten now."

Red peered up at him and felt maybe he hadn't done right in putting Mason up to going along. The boy was liable to get hurt, bad hurt. It was going to be a fight; most likely a bad one. They usually were when Jeb Grimes rode down on anybody. If Mason got killed, Red would always feel mighty sorry. Still, if Mason didn't show some grit somewhere, sometime, he might just as well go off and hide in a hole, stay there and starve.

Mason and Dora walked back to the house. Catherine said, teasing but a little spiteful, too, like a kitten showing claws, "I suppose you don't think much of Dora since she, too, is in love with a Hepple?"

Red snapped, "Pinky ain't a Hepple!"

"Oh. Just what do you mean by that?" Catherine was ready to be angry.

"He's a Bush. They're worse'n Hepples, any day."

"And you,' said Catherine with temper a-flare, "are a cad! And a brute! And. . . ."

Red got a pretty good-sized tongue lashing. He took it patiently, hazily amused that she had so angrily misunderstood. He had spoken, having it in mind that old Dingley Hepple was a fighter; but that the Bushes had a blackleg streak in them, were tricky liars, falsefaced, and mean.

CHAPTER IX

TROUBLE WITH HERDERS

AT three o'clock in the morning Red, sore and stiff, sleepy and feeling mean, squatted on a grain sack in the chill starlight. Three saddled horses, with bridle reins trailing, held their heads low, shifted their feet, stomped.

Old Robertson limped along with Grimes and little Harry Paloo, having a last word and coming out to see them off. He, fierce and peevish, said, "Now understand, Jeb, what we want is skelps! It's all wrong ever to have trouble twict with the same batch o' sheepherders, so make plumb sure they git their bellies full! But if you git a chanct to ask questions, speak up an' find out who's behind 'em." Robertson waggled a lean arm toward Red. "The kid here say it's them Johnsons. I don't much believe it, myself, 'cause God A'mighty, bankers in a cow country that throwed in with sheepherders 'ud be ruint!"

Jeb listened, said nothing. Robertson twisted about to look up toward the ranch house and pulled at his beard, but he, too, was now silent. Paloo took up the reins of his horse and waited, also glancing toward the house.

Jeb Grimes looked neither to the right nor left. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, swung into the saddle.

"Comin', kid?" Paloo asked.

"Me, I'll wait a little. Miz George might think we rode off a-purpose."

Robertson swung up his arm in a parting gesture as the two old lean rangemen rode off. He then turned with clumping stiffness and bent to peer at Red. "Jest who in hell is that feller Mason, Red?"

"Some kid old Col. Howland wished off on us, so I hear."

Robertson growled, stooped lower. "You know Sanzo's trick of playin' he don't know English so he won't have to talk to them he don't like."

"Yep."

"Well, he tells me he overhear'd that feller say to the girl somethin' about, 'When I git this ranch, I'll run things more like they ort a-be.' I jes' wondered some."

"Yeah?' Red lifted his head in a tense vague stare. "Hm. Well, me, I'm goin' to do some wonderin', too, Mr. Robertson."

"Here he comes, I reckon."

Mason rode down off the hillside and out of the shadows at a floppy gallop. A horse had been kept up there for him. He was late, he said, because the Mexican hadn't come to saddle up.

Old Robertson's snort could have been heard as far as a bugle's toot. To his way of thinking, a fellow that needed help in saddling would want somebody around to help button up his pants.

Red got off the grain sack with weary effort, moved as if bowed and crippled. He felt just that way. He rubbed The Ghost's nose, said, "Treat me gentle, son," then climbed into the saddle. "'Bye, Mr. Robertson. Come along, Mason."

Red was riled a little by that hearsay remark reported by Sanzo; so it soothed him some to notice that the way Mason set a saddle would soon

make him tired and sore. They hadn't gone a half mile before Mason gasped, "Is it necessary to go so fast?"

"We got to catch them ahead."

Red pushed on at a lope. It wasn't long before they overtook Grimes and Paloo, jogging side by side. Paloo looked around, smiled pleasantly. Jeb did not turn his head. They went at a trot. Jeb would seldom push a horse faster. In the silence there was faint creak of leather, tingling jingle of spurs, the steady chuff-chuff chuff-chuff of hoofs.

Mason had found the gallop hard. The steady trot became agony. To the man that doesn't set a saddle well, trotting is like being dragged downstairs on his tail bone.

"I've got a pain in my side," said Mason.

"Didn't you ride as a kid?" Red asked.

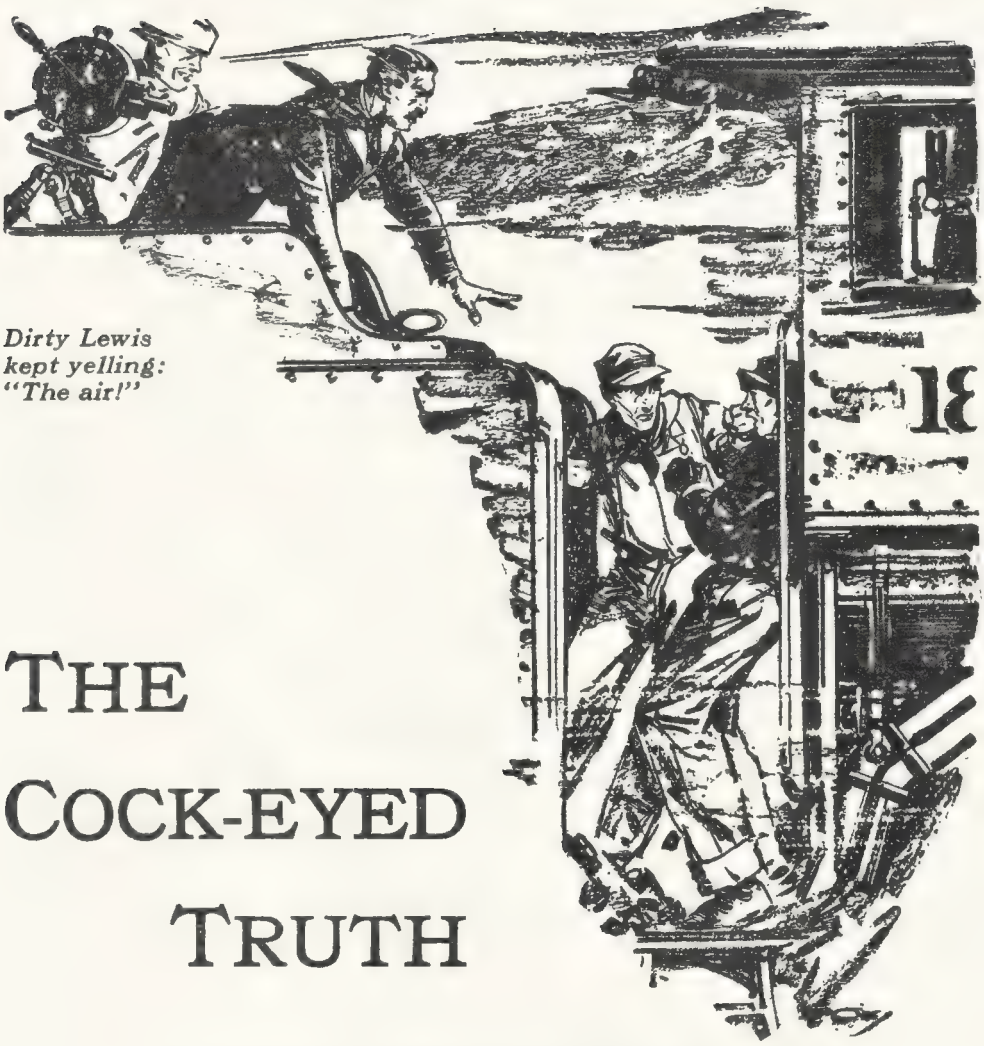
"Only ponies. I don't see how I can stand this pain."

He was in pain. Red didn't for a moment think otherwise, but didn't feel sorry. He suggested, "Pile off and rest. Then catch up."

Mason had a look on his face as if struggling as he rode on, then presently he drew down to a walk, fell back, was soon left out of sight behind a rise of ground, and was not seen again that day.

Paloo turned around a few times, but not Jeb Grimes. He was tall in the saddle, seldom moved his head, but that was no reason for thinking he didn't somehow know what went on behind him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Dirty Lewis kept yelling: "The air!"

THE COCK-EYED TRUTH

By WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES

THE usual procedure when any portion of a train is jerked, heaved, catapulted, or otherwise removed from the tracks is for the crew involved to assemble and stare dumbly at the damage. The conductor and engineer then blame each other, after which they agree on a story and make a report.

The rule is tell as much of the truth as need be, but keep it short. The more complex the affair, the greater the simplicity to be attained. This accomplished, the record is filed with a prayer that the Old Man doesn't get curious.

There were two derailments at Broken Bow, on the Montana Division. Three lines were used in the report of the first to tell how the local freight crew lost the end of an empty car at the end of the storage spur, making no mention of the conductor's pants or dignity. The Old Man got curious, and how!

The second concerned the separation of four cars and caboose from the tail of a work extra, coming off the Cloud Branch at Broken Bow, the upending of the cars in a field and the total loss of the hack. Seven lines, a beautiful work of brevity. The Old Man didn't get curious at all. He didn't have to.

Engineman W. W. Lewis and Conductor Augustus Hubbard authored the first report. They were astute men who believed that when the truth was stranger than fiction you shouldn't strain the Old Man's credulity, and it was all right to juggle the truth in a cock-eyed sort of way. They had visions of what the Old Man would say if they put down as the underlying, overlying and motivating cause of the storage spur wreck the name of Desmond Reade, motion picture star. Especially since, at the time of the accident, Mr. Reade was in Hollywood, almost two thousand miles away.

The report of the second derailment also bore the signatures of the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard, who again were involved. As in the first affair, the cause was put down as a bad brake, which was true only if you switched the letters of that word *brake* and put the *k* on the end. The fact that Desmond Reade's name nowhere appears in the official record certainly is not the fault of the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard, because, along with the Old Man, Desmond was very much there.

This is what happened.

Desmond Reade came into Kate Kendall's life in the dark confines of the Grand Theatre. Kate, who ran the company lunch-room at Broken Bow, was Engineman Lewis's lady fair—a pretty girl, all Lewis could desire, barring the touch of temper and scorn now and then.

The fact that Mr. Reade, at that time, moved into the lives of a couple of million other females, to the annoyance of lovers and husbands, didn't matter. He was an overnight sensation through the good graces of a classic profile, an ability to wear overalls and evening togs, and a capable press agent. He was rated to make young things tremble and strong women sigh. He succeeded.

He swept Kate into states of rapture which made it tough on Mr. Lewis who, at best, was no model of a great lover. Mr. Lewis was just a plain, good-looking, loose-coupled he-man with a flair for playing low jokes on his fellows—a trait which won for him the loving appellation of Dirty.

Dirty made no serious complaints about Kate's lack of balance until the name of Desmond Reade began to be poked at him from all sides, and Mr. Reade's pictures decorated the wall above Kate's array of pies. When Dirty thought Kate had carried things too far, he asserted himself, and war broke out.

The incident in the lunch-room on that hot June day—the day of the first derailment—was due to a renewal of hostilities. Kate insisted Dirty take her to the Grand that night because Desmond was there. Dirty made remarks, and a mop was hurled at him. He ducked and caught it by the handle. He went out to the platform, hurled the mop as far as he could and said things over his shoulder.

He then crawled up to his engine to switch the storage spur. Conductor Hubbard was on the last car in the spur, making motions. Dirty opened the throttle, got a good swoosh in his stack and started backing. Kate, at that moment, came up beneath the cab and called up sweetly:

"Oh, Dir-teee!"

Dirty glanced down. He tried to dodge. Too late. The clammy hank of mop, sudsy and full of cinders, was thrust into his besooted features, filling his mouth and eyes. He neglected the throttle and failed to see Mr. Hubbard's sign to stop.

There came immediately a bone-chilling bang. Conductor Hubbard went on his ear on the car top, clutched at the eaves to save himself and grabbed a handful of wasp nest. The wasps immediately did what they could to resent the intrusion.

They did well. Mr. Hubbard went over the side of the car. A nail, on his

unbridled descent, caught his pants, giving the wasps an opening. He hit the gravel, tore along the platform, and tore off his pants with wild gestures. He found refuge in the waiting-room, where a lady screamed and ran out.

Mr. Lewis got stopped, meanwhile, took in the catastrophe. The ill-fated car was through a fence with the end torn out. Augustus Hubbard was in agony.

Well, there it was. It would look bad in a company report if you put it down that way, according to the Messrs. Hubbard and Lewis. They made it simple. But they hadn't counted on the lady who yelled. She wrote a letter to the general manager who wrote to the Old Man and—well!

THREE weeks without pay is a nasty penalty to hang on a man. "Three weeks to learn you can't lie and get away with it," Superintendent Mayhew had handed down in sentence. He had told Mr. Lewis to contemplate truth as a desirable trait in character and an absolute necessity in derailment reports. Mr. Lewis had removed himself far from sounds of steam and steel to contemplate.

He had had many rivals to deal with in time past, but they had been skippers, brakemen, weak-minded firemen and others of his fraternity. They had been dealt with easily, competently. But this Desmond Reade. Just a mug in a movie. If you had him on the railroad—

Dirty returned on a bright morning in July, wearing his Sunday clothes. He went to the Harbison roundhouse to mark up for his job again. Just inside the door a large fireman with a silly grin winked at him and said:

"You jus' got time fer the beauty contes', Dirt."

The fireman pointed a soiled finger.

Used, as he was, to seeing most anything happen around a railroad, Dirty nevertheless had to swallow and blink. He saw six gentlemen, all main line engineers, attired in raiment used only for lodge or burial. They stood in a line before the crew board. Their faces shone from sharp blades and scrubbing. They stood like soldiers on inspection, erect, eyes front, chests out. And facing them was Superintendent Mayhew and another man—a short man with a freckled face and a straw hat.

The short man in the straw hat was inspecting the hogheads very much as a schoolteacher might look over her charges for signs of unwashed necks, uncombed hair and unscrubbed teeth. Dirty sauntered closer. Several of the men saw him and the expressions on the several faces differed. The reception was somewhat like that which would be accorded to a feline of the civet tribe, a point which Dirty made mental note of, increasing the innocence on his pan.

Dirty said:

"Who's been murdered? Where's the body?"

He looked around inquiringly.

"Thought you'd been," one of the lineup remarked sweetly. "Peaceful three weeks. Now you come back. Oughta be a murder some day, with you present, but cold."

Mr. Mayhew whipped around. Dirty nodded to him kindly. Mr. Mayhew said:

"Oh, you! Dammit, but time flies. Go on about your business. You try to start something here now and—"

"My God!" The man with the straw hat had Dirty by the arm, looking at him intently, his freckled face close. "Don't tell me it's real!"

Dirty jerked his arm free. He felt over his cheeks and chest. He nodded.

"Yuh, reckon it's real a'right. I just ain't quite got the drift—"

Freckle-face had Mr. Mayhew by both shoulders, half jumping up and down.

"Don't tell me he's not an engineer,"

the stranger howled. "Don't dare tell—"

"That's what he's on the payroll as," Mr. Mayhew admitted grudgingly.

"Perfect," the man chortled. "Ab-solutely perfect. Take a look. That profile." Dirty's chin was unceremoniously jerked around. "Better'n the Barrymores. Look at the height, the width of shoulder. Made to order. Why, at twenty yards in soft focus, you couldn't tell the difference."

Dirty, at this point, began to lose patience. His first suspicion was that something smelly was being staged to welcome him home. Still, the Old Man wouldn't be in on anything like that. He said:

"If all this here foolishment ain't a deep-dyed securt—"

"I don't think you'd want Lewis," Mr. Mayhew said half heartedly. "You see, Lewis is what you call—"

"Meat for me," the straw hat interrupted. "If he runs an engine and works on this railroad, that's all we want to know."

Mr. Mayhew shrugged, shook his head sadly, glared at Mr. Lewis. His expression was that of a man who would like to forestall disaster, but is helpless.

"Lewis," the freckle-face said, "my name is Phipps. You've just had a great honor bestowed on you. My company's leased your Cloud Branch and other facilities to make a railroad picture. We had to get a double for the star, who's supposed to be an engineer in the picture. Had to have somebody that'd pass for him in running shots because of the foolish law that won't let just anybody run an engine."

"To hell with that," Dirty said slowly. "I ain't gonna act—"

"Oh, but you don't have to," Mr. Phipps assured. "All you have to do is run the engine, handling our equipment and properties, and coach our star, and have your picture taken at the throttle on long distance and running shots. You see, with a regular two-fisted heman as the engineer—"

"Wait a minute," Dirty broke in. There was something nameless pressing at his lean middle, a wild hope taking possession of him. "Yuh say yuh're makin' picture at Broken Bow on the Cloud Branch, an' yuh want—"

"Exactly," Mr. Phipps said.

"Just who is this here star?" Dirty's eyelids drooped.

"Oh, pardon me." Mr. Phipps bowed apologetically. "I should have mentioned it. You've probably heard of him. His name is Reade—Desmond Reade."

DIRTY saw Kate once, to speak to, in the first four days of that motion picture nightmare at Broken Bow. That was on the first evening, just after supper. He reclined on a baggage truck on the platform, staring innocently at the moon. Kate came out of the shadows, faced him.

"Lissen, you big tramp," Kate said, her voice low but vibrant. "I don't know how you worked it to get here on this job, but I know why you're here."

Dirty said:

"You do me wrong, my sweet."

"When they introduced you to Mr. Reade this morning," Kate went on, "I saw that vacant look come over your pan—the look you always wear when you're thinking up ways to be playful."

Dirty ran a long finger up the side of his nose. He looked pained.

"And," Kate blasted, "what did you do when the director told you to show Mr. Reade how engineers acted inside a cab?"

From Dirty's expression he had done nothing wrong. He stared at her.

"You had the poor lamb doing everything but hanging by his heels from the ventilator hatch in the roof. It's a good thing Mr. Mayhew came along before you actually did real damage to Mr. Reade's person."

Dirty turned pained eyes to his dear one.

"You musn't say such things, kitten," he mourned. "You're gettin' just like Mr. Mayhew, always accusin' me. Whutta I wanta do things to Mr. Reade for? The poor sap. He—"

"He's not a sap," Kate defended vehemently.

Dirty noticed little things about the change of her stance, the toss of her head, and came to his feet to be better able to defend himself from bodily injury.

"I know," Kate drove in, "you'd like to make him look little in the eyes of his company. Well, you won't, see? You did enough in that cab. From here on I'm taking him as my charge. I'm looking for him. And you make one move—you just try one move and Montana won't be big enough for the two of us."

"But you got me wrong, dovey," Dirty urged. You—"

"And don't you dovey me. I'm a lady and I hope to remain one. You get playful, and—"

DIRTY had to wait through four long days because it seemed that Mr. Mayhew had some of Kate's ideas. On the fourth day Mr. Mayhew went back to Harbison, leaving a second assistant train master in charge, and Dirty's playfulness began to get the better of him. The great hero of the screen had suddenly adopted a superior attitude toward him. Kate had made good her threat to take the gentleman in tow, and the star seemed to relish Kate's spicy company.

Mr. Reade was a ringer for Mr. Lewis in size, and there even was a rough sort of facial resemblence. Their carriage was very much alike. Mr. Reade had risen to his present pinnacle through highly original plots which started him out as a boiler-maker, steel worker or some other sort of laborer, from which position he is suddenly raised through the efforts of the boss's daughter with whom he falls in love, attains power, wealth and trouble; forgets his old companions, loses everything because his wife wants him as he used to be, and finally finds himself back in the old home town at the old job, poor but happy.

Mr. Reade had a swell frame for undershirts, sweat greased on his neck, flame reflecting in the sweat. He could shout and fight in a two-fisted manner, and, to see a picture of his, you'd swear he took to dirt and sweat naturally. You'd think he was a pretty good guy. He was, as Jimmy Phipps, the press agent could tell you, more afraid of getting his hands soiled than a Sennett comedy maid is of a mouse. He affected the most collegiate garb when he wasn't on the set, as mental relief from the ignominy of grime and overalls.

On that fourth day the local freight unloaded a long, low, cream-colored roadster with much nickle and bright red leather upholstering. Mr. Reade held up the morning's shooting while he personally supervised the job of getting the car to the ground. The assistant director, whose clothes were clean, was charged was filling the tank and backing the machine up on the platform for future use.

The machine troubled Dirty all through the hot afternoon. Kate had her eye on it. She had her eye on Desmond. Dirty read the signs and began thinking. Just some little joke on this two-for-a-nickel sport.

The set-up was perfect. Dirty saw it when he backed his engine in the spur behind the depot for the supper hour. He backed up to a point near the baggage room and got off. Alongside his tender was a platform baggage truck loaded with large, shiny milk cans all empty. On the other side of the truck was Desmond's roadster. Dirty took it all in as he got off the engine. It suddenly occured to him that, with a coil of rope, he could have fun.

All during supper, from his seat at the end of the counter, he could see Kate watching him. Was that a gleam of triumph in her eyes? She wore the air of one who knows something unknown to anybody else in the world. The more he ate, the more Dirty thought. The more he thought, the greater the innocence in his kindly eyes, the deeper the cloak of humility about his person.

Later, in the shadow of the early mountain night, Conductor Hubbard whispered from the darkness under the platform shed:

"It ain't gonna do any good, Dirty."

"It sure ain't gonna do any harm to try," Dirty said. He was on his knees at the rear bumper of the shiny car. A coil of rope lay near him. One end had already been secured about the baggage truck handle.

Presently Dirty rose, satisfied. He rubbed his hands on his overalls, peered about.

"Let's rest in the telegraph office," he said.

It seemed a long time before he heard the whine of the starter. The road leaving the platform, made a dip about thirty feet down, and then ascended. There was fifty feet of rope. The roadster ought to be whipping up out of the dip at a good clip when that rope was all payed out. Then the truck—"

The vast thunder generated by the approach of a westward tonnage freight kept Dirty from hearing the cans pile in the dip. He would like to be there to see the expression on his kitten's face. He decided to take a walk around. Conductor Hubbard accompanied him.

They came around to where the roadster had stood. Dirty caught his breath sharply. The car was gone but the milk cans still were there. He was about to make an inspection of the rope when the assistant train master came up.

"Looking for you men," the official piped. "Take this engine down to the tank and get water now, then bank the fire and turn in. Leave it in the storage spur."

Dirty mounted to his cushion with a sense of disappointment. The westbound drag was thundering up the main, working hard and kicking sparks to the clouds. The headlight bathed the platform in dancing silver. The spur in which Dirty's engine rested was known as the team track, and it curved toward the main track leaving the platform, thence entering the west bound siding, paralleling the main. Dirty opened his throttle, wondering.

As Dirty explained later in his report, you couldn't hear anything, what with the noise of the main line train, and his own engine. He charged ahead after having waked his fireman. He felt no drag, was not aware of anything unusual until he saw fire suddenly fly from the freight's wheel line just after the big engine had passed him. He turned around in his seat, looked back. He saw a variety of fancy stop signals from two lanterns. He stopped.

Well, they explained it in their report, the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard did, and they used six tightly written pages to say that they had no idea who tied the baggage truck to the tender of their engine. All they knew was that when the rope payed out, the milk cans trundled along the platform, hit the edge. The baggage truck then listed slightly to the left, dumped some cans in front of the approaching drag and thereafter pandemonium raged.

The baggage truck was utterly destroyed, almost all the cans were completely demolished or badly dented, and the freight train, in making its sudden stop, broke in two with the coupler of one car out by the roots. The freight, of course, lost considerable time setting out the cripple and getting under way again.

There certainly was nothing simple and brief about the report that Engineman Lewis and Conductor Hubbard

signed. They went so far as to say that the only person in the vicinity of the milk cans, just prior to the accident, was Desmond Reade who went to get his car. They let it go at that. The Old Man could get as curious as he cared to. He had the picture of a locomotive attempting to tow a platform truck loaded with milk cans down a spur.

KATE KENDALL had no poker face. She was, after all, a woman and therefore hard put to keep a personal triumph a secret. She might as well have come to Dirty and said:

"Well, you big tramp. You see, I know you so well, I knew to look when I saw those milk cans so handy. And—

As for Reade, you couldn't look tell anything. His air of innocence would equal Dirty's any day.

It was Jimmy Phipps who tipped Dirty off. He said:

"It was Reade who tied the milk cans to you, Lewis. I know the signs. We gotta watch him in Hollywood. He gets playful now and then, and when he puts his mind to making other people unhappy, you have to watch out. Watch that innocent air of his. That's a damn bad sign."

Dirty watched Mr. Reade carefully. The star continued to treat him with a certain aloofness which didn't disturb Mr. Lewis at all. What did worry Dirty was the sudden interest the star took in a grimy little red book called "Handbook of Locomotive Repairs." Mr. Reade had discovered it in the seat box on the engine, badly thumbed and worn and smeared with grease. Why this should disturb him, Dirty did not know.

He solved the mystery in a very embarrasing way, and then it was too late to do anything about it except write a report.

It happened on the morning when the company planned to shoot long distance and speed shots. They weren't bothering with the sound on the engine scenes, having planned to fake those later in the studio. They instructed Dirty that he was to back up east of the station about a mile, coast down to the platform and then, at a given signal he was to open wide on his throttle and blast by the depot with accompanying thunder. He was to be leaning far out his window, tense. He was supposed to be Mr. Reade, in a very exciting moment. The director told him to watch for the signal and then take the engine by the neck.

If his mind hadn't been a beautiful blank as he backed up with his several cars and caboose, Dirty might have got suspicious. He paid no attention, however, to that funny bubbling sound at the pop valves. He came to a stop at the "Station One Mile" sign, threw his reverse lever forward, kicked off his brakes, and let his train roll down the grade, drifting with a closed throttle.

Dirty's momentum was perhaps twenty miles an hour as he neared the platform. He was leaning out his window with his hand on the throttle and a look of disgust on his innocent pan. He watched the director's arm, saw the camera men with their lenses trained on him from different angles.

The director's arm swung down, and Dirty pulled his throttle wide. The exhaust belched through the stack and brought something else up with it. There was no time to pull in his head. It all happened so very suddenly. He was showered with a spray of thick, muddy substance which also sprayed the platform. Havoc was complete.

The assistant train master came running up when Dirty stopped. He yelled:

"What the hell you trying to do, Lewis?"

Mr. Lewis, who was getting mud and rust out of his hair and eyes with a piece of cotton waste, looked sadly about him. He saw Mr. Reade advancing from the direction of the lunch room. He noticed that Mr. Reade looked extreme-

ly guileless. Dirty faced the train master. He said, "She foamed," referring to his boiler. He continued to mop at his face, and to stare at the star who, of all that company, alone was without spot or blemish.

"I know she foamed," the officer said. "I know that. What the hell did you do to it to make it foam?" He was glaring in a good imitation of Mr. Mayhew.

"Whut? Me?" Dirty blinked. "You ain't inferrin' I had anything to do—"

"We investigate right now, and we get a report," the officer snapped.

The report was a work of art. It was authored by the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard, who stated that a person, or persons unknown, had dumped into the locomotive tender several pounds of corn meal and several boxes of soap flakes, which, when properly mixed with the boiler water, caused a volcanic eruption which delayed all picture making for several hours while equipment could be cleaned and the locomotive's boiler completely washed out.

The assistant train master mailed the report with a little notation of his own. He wrote:

"I don't know what it is, Mr. Mayhew, but I think there's something between Lewis and Mr. Reade, although there is no outward indication of anything unpleasant. Just something in the air I cannot explain."

Kate, meanwhile, approached Mr. Lewis in a belligerent mood. She planted her lovely feet slightly apart on the platform, threw back her head, dropped her eyelids into a knowing squint.

"Well," she said, "that's one time when your little ideas didn't work!"

"Whut's that, my duck?' Dirty asked, gazing down upon her. He swallowed.

"Doing whatever it was you did to that engine," Kate stormed. "Trying to turn a trick on Desmond. Well, smarty, it looks like the trick turned on you."

"You just got me all wrong, my honey," Dirty said sadly. "If you think I had anything to do with—"

"Lissen, you big tramp," Kate cut in sweetly, "someday you're going to go just a little too far, and when you do—"

MR. MAYHEW came to Broken Bow to do a little checking. He also apparently wanted to be there to see that there would be no repetitions of the milk can and boiler foaming episodes. Which hampered Mr. Lewis no end. Mr. Lewis had been spending hours with his mind at work thinking up some dire revenge to wreak upon the person of Desmond Reade who, at this point, had won all innings.

Since the movie company would be finished in a day or two, Mr. Mayhew decided to stick around and see the successful completion of the work. This was a complete handicap to Mr. Lewis who, by this time, had decided to take defeat very gracefully only after every effort to get Mr. Reade in his hands. He thought once of praying, but the presence of Mr. Mayhew across the cab, as he backed twenty cars and Gus Hubbard's caboose up the Cloud Branch, made the efficacy of prayer seem pretty doubtful. He never dreamed that Mr. Mayhew would be the agency to accomplish what he sought.

The picture company was ready to shoot the final scenes. Dirty listened to the director's instructions as the train stood on a level shelf at the edge of the long descent to Broken Bow. Mr. Reade, as the heroic engineer, was to rescue the blonde heroine from the clutches of a gang, rush with her to his waiting cab and flee down the mountain. The villain was to swing on the moving train behind the tender, climb over the coal and come to death grips with Mr. Reade in the cab as the train sped, out out of control, down to what looked like certain doom. Dirty thought it was all silly as hell. He rubbed his long nose reflectively.

There were cameras all over the place. There was one on top about three cars back, another on the coal, a third in the gangway and a fourth on the pilot out front to gather in the reeling miles. Assistants climbed over everything. There was much shouting and repeating of orders, and finally a rehearsal was called. The rehearsals worked all right, so the ground scene's were shot.

Dirty climbed to the cab and sat at the throttle. Mr. Reade came up with the director and Mr. Mayhew. The blonde heroine checked up on her complexion.

"Tell me when you're set," Dirty said.

"Mr. Reade is taking the throttle for a while," the director informed.

"Whut's that?" Dirty couldn't believe his ears.

"On my authority," Mr. Mayhew said. "The company has to shoot some intricate scenes. All in this cab. While it's moving. You try your air. Then come back here on the coal and sit with me. Mr. Reade knows how to start, and how and where to begin braking. He has to stage a fight at the throttle."

"Naw, sir," Dirty demurred. "There ain't any actor gonna handle a throttle on a engine I'm responsible for." He glared at the hero. Unheard of!

"You'll get off that cushion or I'll throw you off," Mr. Mayhew snapped. "I still happen to be the boss of the division."

"It's agin all rules," Dirty defended. "You know—"

"Since when've rules meant anything in your life?" Mr. Mayhew demanded. "You come back here by the coal gate. We'll watch."

Dirty half rose from his seat. He looked back along the train. He twisted his air valve around and it showed the proper reduction from the movement of the hands on the dial. He saw the flagman, near the caboose, wave a signal. Reluctantly he gave his seat over to Mr. Reade as he released the brakes.

The director took up where he had left off when Reade had loaded the girl into the cab. There was some intense emoting, a few tears, a show of tenderness on the part of Mr. Reade who put the girl on the seat behind him, crouched himself on the edge of the cushion, opened the throttle and started the drama. Dirty planted himself beside the super. They crouched down by the coal gate out of the way.

The villian came up on the coal from behind the tender and the camera on the tank was busy registering his stealthy approach. Something happened that director didn't like, so the scene was made over again by which time the train was getting a good roll down the long hill.

The camera in the cab then registered close up emotions of the hero and the girl with the whir of scenery as background, along with lip movement which would later have to put into sound to record the conversation. The camera was then moved back, and made ready for the fight scene. The girl was to look back over her shoulder, see the villain and scream. Whereupon Mr. Reade was to leap down from his cushion and into the fray.

While the camera was being made ready, the engine lurched on a curve. Mr. Lewis listened to the click of the wheels over the rail joints, took one look at the scenery and turned to Mr. Mayhew.

He yelled, above the engine noises:

"You better have Mr. Reade do somethin' about pinchin' her down. We're gettin' a hell of a roll. If we don't get some brakes soon—"

Mr. Mayhew, who was intensely interested in what was going on, jerked the rising Mr. Lewis back into a squat. Mr. Lewis stared at the super, shook his head negatively and told himself, "To hell with it." From where he sat he could see Mr. Reade and he hoped Mr. Reade would remember to pull that little

brass handle around as he had been instructed.

Mr. Reade did. Dirty saw the hands on the gauge function perfectly. But he felt something else. Only the slightest check. Then a forward surge. Something was cock-eyed. The air wasn't holding. He got to his feet and saw that the landscape was a sickening blur. He paid no attention to the camera. He was not aware that the villain was sneaking down the coal behind him. He did hear the girl yell.

And then Mr. Lewis was where the villain should have been. Mr. Lewis was in the cab, in the camera range, and yelling:

"The air! The air!"

MR. READE couldn't be exactly blamed. After all, the girl's yell was his cue. He didn't take time to identify personalities. He was an actor, and he was acting. He was saving a fair charmer from a fate worse than death. He was defending her with his life. He was, in short, beating the hell out of Mr. Lewis before that worthy gentleman quite knew what had happened to him.

Mr. Lewis kept yelling:

"The air!"

Instinctively he brought his own fists into play. He was conscious of one thing only. He had to get this train under control. He had to do it if he had to kill somebody. He took a staggering blow above the heart, came in with his own hard knuckles, and blood suddenly appeared at Mr. Reade's nostrils. Another sock, and Mr. Reade's left eye was temporarily out of service. Another terrific smack, and Mr. Reade slumped against the seat, sunk to his knees and listened to birdies sing.

Simultaneously a large delegation waited on Mr. Lewis. Mr. Mayhew was holding him by the bib of the overalls. pulling him back. The director was shouting:

"You damn fool, we're supposed to be staging a picture—a fight and a runaway!"

"Get to hell back from me," Dirty bellowed. He even gave Mr. Mayhew a shove. "That's what you're doin'. Runnin' away. We ain't got any air!"

Wherewith he swung from them and twisted the brake valve himself. There were brakes on engine and tender only. There were twenty cars rolling free behind, shoving him. He was doing a good fifty miles an hour on tracks and curves never built for that speed. If he didn't do something shortly, he would be switching cars with the angels.

Mr. Mayhew, the director, the camera men and others were warming about him, yelling foolish questions at him. He tried the brake valve and looked at the attachments. Every gadget in the cab was right.

The blonde clung to his arm, pleading with him. Mr. Reade stirred faintly on the floor. Dirty shoved them all away from him. His mind was clicking with the speed of light, going back. Yes, he made the regulation test of the air just before he had turned the throttle over to Reade. The signal from the rear had told him that the air was through. There could only be one other place to look now for the trouble. There had been a number of people climbing over the couplers back of the tender. There was a possibility—

Dirty went over the coal with the engine racing crazily under him. The tender bounced, careened, kicked up coal dust from the sifting of its load. He held on grimly, crouching low. Finally he reached the rear and looked down where the nuzzling couplers clanked against the dizzy gray blur of ballast beneath. His eyes narrowed. There was the trouble all right. The angle cock which permitted the flow of air through the train pipe. Some big foot had twisted it, cut it out.

Facing the danger of being jarred into

kingdom come with each move he made, Dirty climbed down the ladder back of the tank, steadied himself, leaned over and twisted the angle cock handle back to the on position. He prayed that too much air hadn't leaked out of the train. There was a bare chance to hold 'em if he handled 'em right. It would take precision.

He scrambled back to the cab where, by now, everybody but the Old Man was pale and quiet. The Old Man was holding to the throttle bar quadrant watching his engineman slide down the coal, stagger to his cushion and begin to do his stuff.

The engine bounced into the air on the left-hand side, seemed to leave the railroad entirely, clanked as it settled back on its frame again and whipped its twenty cars around the three-degree curve. Dirty worked with his air slowly in the effort to get some brakes on the wheels, and still keep the wheels on the tracks. He didn't have much luck. The air had been cut out of the train too long. The pumps had to speed to send air back the length of the reeling cars.

Mile after mile, minute after minute. Grim miles, grim minutes when life, property and any future pursuit of happiness depended on a man's hand. Almost imperceptibly at first, Dirty got enough brakes to check the mad drop, saw the needles on the air gauge tell him the story he wanted to read.

Below was the last big bend, the sharp twist around a ledge of rock that brought the track out on a tangent and down to the main line switch at Broken Bow. Dirty realized there was only a scant chance that he'd get 'em stopped before he came to the switch, provided he kept 'em right-side up on that curve. He reached up and tied down his whistle. He hoped the operator at the depot would protect any presently due trains against his entrance. He hoped the operator would open the switch.

With his whistle howling, the loose tools bouncing up and down on the steel plate in the gangway, and his white, tight-lipped passengers holding to everything in sight, Dirty swung into view of the depot and saw the operator running for the switch. He saw the target change and uttered one last prayer that, in bending into the main iron, the wheels would show the same tenacity for good solid steel as they had shown on this descent. He breathed easier. He had cut his speed down to a bare thirty miles an hour. There was fire at his wheel line where the brake shoes were holding true. He had 'em in his lap.

That was one moment. The next was another story. Strained to the limit on the rollicking descent, a weak copuler decided the time was ripe on this last curve to let go. It did. The train parted.

Even the astute Mr. Lewis paled when he felt it. He felt it and knew what had happened. He looked back quickly. The train had parted, the air now in full emergency on both ends of it. He saw the hind cars—four of them—piling up with the caboose. They pitched headlong for the scenery, turned end over end, rolled crazily.

And then he saw no more on that end. His engine, with wheels locked was sliding into the switch and on to the main line, dragging sixteen buggies with smoking wheels behind it.

The work extra came to rest in a cloud of dust. People came running. In the lead was Miss Kate Kendall. She stood aghast when tender arms lifted down the wounded star. Dirty dropped to the gravel behind him. Reade was in a mess. He could only partly see, and his classic features would have to have a good long rest before they would be much good to his public.

Kate took in the scene, confronted Dirty.

"You big tramp," she hurled in a voice that was low and vibrant. "You—"

Dirty took her arm in his hard, soiled paw. He swung her around. He put his own marred face down into hers. He said:

"You start callin' me names now, my sweet, after what that punk just done to mebbe put us all in heaven, an' I'll turn you over my knee. I'm fed up on you, you dizzy piece of hash-slingin'—"

"Dirty," breathlessly. Her eyes were large and round. "Oh—oh, Dirty you—"

"You heard me," Dirty said gently, firmly.

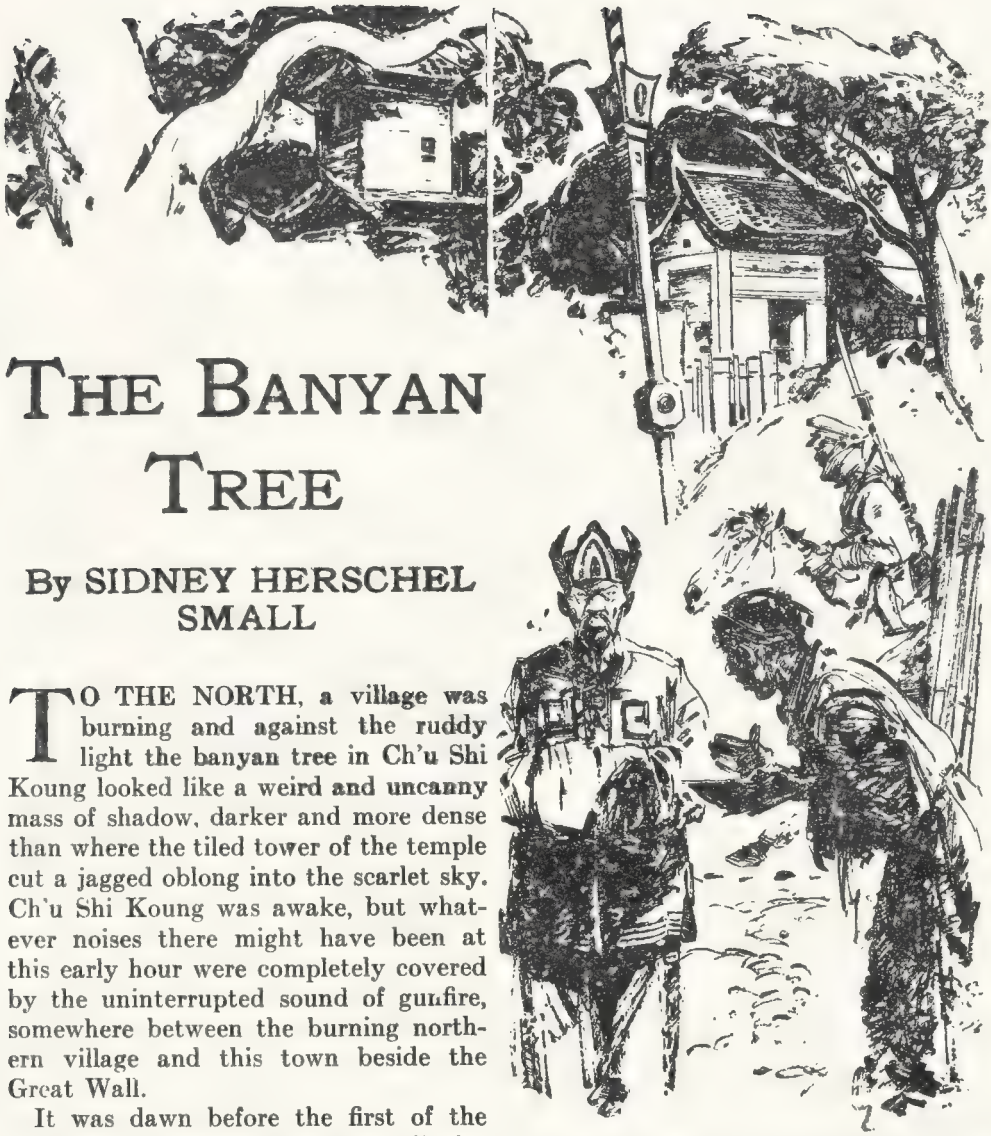
She seemed to notice his features for the first time, and the blood that was dried on his cheek. Tender hands went up to the leathery hide.

"Oh, Dirty, you're hurt."

She clung to him. He shoved her away roughly. There were some rites and ceremonies due. There was a gathering to be had at the scene of the wreck and a little discussion as to a report.

THE COPY of that report that's in Mr. Mayhew's files is the one of seven lines, and it bears the signature of the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard. A lovely bit of railroad brevity. It isn't the report that the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard wrote. Oh, hell, no! What they put down took seven pages and it covered everything from the superintendent's violation of rules to permit an empty-headed actor to take the throttle, down to Engineman Lewis's personal opinion of actors in general.

It read like a moving drama, and it contained the truth with nothing cock-eyed about it. But the Old Man thought a thing like that might strain somebody's credulity in case any of the higher-ups ever read it. He had a pencil. He had been once a conductor in his own right. He wrote seven lines and filed it, and prayed that the Messrs. Lewis and Hubbard, at least, would never get curious.



"I starve, lord," Yee Cheng Li fawned

THE BANYAN TREE

By SIDNEY HERSCHEL SMALL

TO THE NORTH, a village was burning and against the ruddy light the banyan tree in Ch'u Shi Koung looked like a weird and uncanny mass of shadow, darker and more dense than where the tiled tower of the temple cut a jagged oblong into the scarlet sky. Ch'u Shi Koung was awake, but whatever noises there might have been at this early hour were completely covered by the uninterrupted sound of gunfire, somewhere between the burning northern village and this town beside the Great Wall.

It was dawn before the first of the retreating Chinese stumbled wearily into Ch'u Shi Koung; dawn, and the sun, all at once, seemed to slide out of the eastward plain. As if an enchanter's hand touched the forest of leaves of the gigantic tree, it assumed form, shape, and brilliant color. Soon the light flashed across the fertile fields and on to the tops of the houses, painting the summits of the hills until the last lingering shadow vanished. Even the bloody sky faded to a pale bluish yellow, the hue of a wounded soldier's face.

Not until then did the first villager unbar his door; not until then was the first bowlful of rice and vegetables handed out to the fleeing men. The khaki-clad Chinese soldiers shoved food from bowl to mouth, held out a hand for dried sprat and tea, and, mouths still full, muttered a prayer and fled again. Inside the largest house in the town, the headman, once a mandarin, saw to it that a great potful of rice was ready; he was very old, and the sound of gunfire was

an old sound to him. Beside him, and the pot, was a granddaughter, ladling out rice:

"Better hide her," suggested a weary under-officer. "They follow us fast, the brown men from Japan, and they were without women. I advise it, honorable Elder One. I have seen things—"

"*Kau ni lok ho to sut*," said old Yee Ming sagely. "Are the possessions of my house to be disturbed merely because there is another fighting? Ho! I have seen many battles and much death, and there is always a code. Tell me; have you seen the son of my house, whose name is Yee Cheng Li? He is, like yourself, young, and has strange ideas, such as fighting with his men instead of sitting in a pavilion in the rear of the conflict."

There was the tap-tap of a machine gun, very close, as the gunner sought out the range; tap-tap . . . tap-tap . . . and then a quick burst. The officer took the pipe which a maid held out to him, and sucked down the three lungfuls of tobacco. "I have not seen him," he said. Bowing, "For the food and words of wisdom, my gratitude. May the gods—"

"You had better run," smiled the old man.

He trusted that Yee Cheng Li was not running as this officer was now; that his own son was riding away from the battlefield mounted on a horse trapped with crimson and orange and green silks, a commanding, calm figure, rereating in an honorable fashion. Such was the proper conduct during fighting, even when the enemy was from a barbarous island. Standing in his courtyard, he watched the first of the assailants slip into the village, squat, slouching Japanese in ill-fitting uniforms. They were small men, and Yee Ming had small opinion of their probable fighting qualities. It was, he supposed, a matter, at the present time, of numbers.

"My silk jacket and the badge of my office," he said placidly. "It will also be well if considerable food is cooked. The leaders of the brown men will undoubtedly honor me by dining here. See to it that the wine is properly warmed and that there is plenty of it."

The mass of the defending forces had retreated to one side of Ch'u Shi Koung, but into it, now, stormed the right wing of the Japanese. Slipping on a crisp black silk jacket over his padded house coat, Yee Ming began walking toward the banyan tree. Here, according to tradition, the mandarin should wait and discuss matters with the conquerors; so many catties of tea, so much dried fish, so many rolls of heavy silk; of thin beaten gold, so many taels, all to be delivered up peaceably, in return for which the enemy would assure the safety of the village. Yee Ming, a little sadly, remembered the fires of the night; it was an ill thing that the northern village had not been able to meet the demands, but Ch'u Shi Koung was a rich village (how rich he had no intention of admitting to the Japanese) and would continue to stand for another hundred generations. .

Twice soldiers pushed him roughly aside, and Yee Ming intended to protest to the invading chiefs about it. Were the men blind? Did they not see that he was a person of power and importance? He frowned as he saw a soldier prod a dead man with his gun-butt, and then, suddenly, his old eyes went wide. For a moment startled recognition was in them, and fear; almost instantly his face became bland and impassive, but a little older than it had been.

The temple sweeper who came cringing along the street was, for all his rags, filth and tatters, Yee Cheng Li, his son, who should have been with the Chinese army. Yee Cheng Li, who had but one fault: his willingness to fight, his aggressiveness, his hot quick temper. It was amazing to see the impetuous fellow dressed like this, and slinking along like a village cur.

"A bowl of food, lord," whined the

temple sweeper to a burly Chinese who was walking with several lieutenants. "I starve, lord. Food!"

Yee Ming observed that the brawny man was Su'i Sou, whose business and affairs had of late become secretive. This secret, Yee Ming decided, was one no longer. He watched Su'i Sou shove the beggar aside and pass on; then the tattered son of his house was wailing to him, also, for alms:

"I starve, lord," Yee Cheng Li fawned, eyes on the earth. "A bowl of food—Oh, father, I came to tell you to depart before the Japanese reached this village. I have not eaten for days, master . . . . and have the women, my sisters, dressed in old rags. Stay away from the banyan tree if you can, or you will be held as a hostage—"

"What foolishness is this?" snapped Yee Ming.

"I have seen too much for it to be foolishness," the son whispered bitterly. As an officer strutted up the narrow street, Yee Cheng Li became servile; when the Japanese was past, he continued swiftly:

"This will become a villege of the invaders, for a week, a month, a year. Or more. Then it will be destroyed. I have seen what happens." Reading his father's thoughts, he added. "There is not enough rice nor silk nor gold to save the village. Prepare the household for departure, and—and array yourself, if possible, as an old servant."

"It is my opinion," said Yee Ming judicially, "that the sun has touched you. You, an officer, in rags, informing me that villages are burned and the important person held as prisoner. That is silly. However it comes to my mind that you are here for some other purpose, of which I will not approve. That is true?"

"I am here to do what I can to—help," said Yee Cheng Li. As he spoke, his head went high for a moment, and the father sensed the strength and courage in the son. "Now, return to your house."

"You give orders?" Yee Ming frowned. "This is what comes of a different education than the study of the Virtues!"

Yee Cheng Li said grimly, "I plead. War is no longer conflict between nobles. It will do us no good to say, 'Let them conquer us; in the end we will absorb them.' Those days are over. I, on my part, am here because of orders. I—"

"I," said Yee Ming. "I, I. There is too much of this I. Let *me* give an order. in old rags. Stay away from the banyan tree to begin negotiations, go to our house, attire yourself properly, and, humbly, sit in veneration of Kuan Yin until such time as sense comes to you. I will explain your presence here to the invaders by saying that you are according to *my* order, and—"

"And then," said Yee Cheng Li, "you will see your son become a meal for the crows."

Yee Ming considered this. His son had never lied to him, and was not lying now. Perhaps it would be as well not to mention his name and rank to anyone. Nevertheless, the rest of the old man's command was in strict accord with every convention: "Go to the house and ask the gods for sense," said Yee Ming. "At once."

The conflict in the younger man's head was almost apparent to any half-keen observer, although he strove to retain his part as a temple sweeper, a beggar. The training of his youth demanded that he obey, instantly, without question; common sense and the turmoil seething around them told him that he must try to dissuade the older man from going to the banyan tree and becoming an hostage. A few hours of the occupation would then convince Yee Ming the hopelessness of negotiation of any kind. Yee Cheng Li was sorriest that he had reached the village too late to warn everyone, but it had been diffi-

cult, since the last part of his ordered flight had been through the combatants.

He knew that Yee Ming's mind was made up, and so said, "I have not seen you for many months, father. May I accompany you to the banyan tree? Is it permitted?"

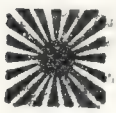
Smiling wrinkles radiated from Yee Ming's eyes. "It is an evil father who refuses the loving request of his son," he quoted. "Come, then, and see how I manage the affair, and what an expert bargainer I am."

A trooper, on a saggy Manchurian pony, spurred down the street, and the old man was almost ridden down. Only Yee Cheng Li's quick grasp and pull kept Yee Ming from being hurled to the dust of the street.

"What sort of war is this?" gasped the old Chinese. "I was in sight; he saw me, but did not alter his course!"

"War has changed, and—"

"And it is more important than ever, then, that I go to the banyan tree and negotiate speedily, lest some officer of no importance hurt one of the villagers. I will allow nothing like that! I am responsible for everyone here, and the high officers are going to know it. They, being men of rank, as I am, will agree."



FATHER and son, Yee Cheng Li mowing and scraping, were pressed against the wall of a house, and several companies shuffled passed them. Yee Ming was disappointed in the drabness of the men. Here were no brilliant uniforms, no trappings; no conches howled, no crimson banners waved. The soldiers appeared tired and worn, and without such smiles as should wreathe the lips of triumphant men. Soon, Yee Ming believed, they would desert (as soldiers always did) to the wine-cup and the dancing girls, and would be absorbed in no time at all. They should make good field hands. Well, so had many another army been dispersed, in the old days. In the end, China always won. It would be so now.

He felt that possibly the masquerade assumed by Yee Cheng Li might be a good thing for his son's spirit; perhaps the fellow had learned docility, although Yee Cheng Li believed that under his son's demeanor was a seething, riotous anger, which might break out at any time like the river-waters in spring. Did Yee Cheng Li really mean that capture meant death? That was impossible, since Yee Cheng Li was not actually fighting at this time, but had come to the village to warn a parent, which, in itself, was an act of virtue . . .

It became more and more difficult to move as they approached the great tree. Yee Ming, always gracious and smiling, was shoved this way and that. Once Yee Cheng Li, shuffling along in the rear, whispered, "You must go to the tree?"

"That has already been settled," said Yee Ming, and his son sighed, so deeply that the old man stared at him curiously. "What importance has the tree to you?" he demanded.

"None," said Yee Ming. "None, now."

"It should always have importance," said Yee Ming doubtfully. "It is a tree so old that the gods themselves planted the seed. It—*hai-ya!*—what are they doing to the tree?"

The old man feared that the gigantic banyan was about to be pulled down; he saw the rope attached to one of the gnarled, twisted branches, but Yee Cheng Li, out of his experience, saw more. He said quietly, his eyes smouldering, "They hang a spy to the tree, honorable father."

Breath coming with difficulty, because of the emotion within him, Yee Ming said only, "Oh," but he touched the tatters of his son's garb.

"I am not a spy," said Yee Cheng Li.

Yee Ming, shaken, muttered, "I am glad of that," and, eyes glued to the banyan tree, watched the swaying figure at the rope's end dance in strangulation

to his miserable death. He whispered a word to get the departing soul through the First and Second Gates, controlled the trembling of his own legs, and started forward again. He said levelly, "It will be better if I continue alone now. I will see you after the discussion, my son Cheng Li."

He dared not ask the younger man if death by hanging came to men who were not spies.

Without glancing back, but with the knowledge that Cheng Li was behind him, although no longer as if they walked together, the old man marched solemnly ahead. As he neared the trunk of the tree, about which regimental officers were standing, some smoking, some talking together, all acting as if they knew the meaning of the banyan tree and waited for the chief person of the village to arrive, a voice was raised, a finger pointed, and immediately the officer turned toward the advancing Yee Ming. Cheng Li had faded into the crowd.

The headman recognized the voice only when he saw the speaker; it was Su'i Sou, acting like a man of substance, and it was he who explained the demands of the invaders. "The village," the renegade ended, "must be emptied by sunset of all save yourself. You remain. If there is trouble, you will have a rope about your neck, and leap about to death in the tree, like the ape you have always been."

Yee Ming glanced at the group of officers. He addressed them in careful Mandarin: "I speak for the village," he said, hoping someone might understand. "I am prepared to offer payment for safety. We are not rich, but we have a little gold and silver and silk, a little food—"

One of the Japanese answered him; "This is war. We need the village."

So Cheng Li had been right! Without hope, Yee Ming said, "We will pay heavily."

The Japanese shook his head.

"And," added the grinning renegade. "I only wish Cheng Li were here, so I might torture him for the things he has done to me, when he supposed I was of no importance—"

Yee Ming recalled that his son had caught the renegade stealing, and, hotheadedly, had beaten him. He brushed invisible dust from his sleeve, and stared contemptuously at the grinning Su'i Sou. There was no sense in informing Su'i Sou what he thought of him; this was no time for such discussion. He spoke once more to the officer. "Where shall we go?" he asked. "To the north there has been war and famine. To the east, men are fighting. You pursue our armies southward. In the west are the hills of hunger, with not enough food for the mountain villages. Are we to starve?"

The officer said, "Each man may take away what feed he can carry. Tools may be taken also. No gold or silver. All sacks will be inspected. Animals remain here. That is all."

Yee Ming bowed sadly. He saw how preparations were being made for the officers' stay. The banyan tree's branches would shield them from the sun, and some of the smaller branches were being chopped to give them fuel for their fires. The banyan tree which had stood for a hundred generations. He thought how wonderful it would be if Cheng Li, in crimson and green, could come galloping into the village at the head of a thousand horsemen, as it might have been in the old days, Cheng Li, who was disguised as a temple sweeper—his son! As more branches were chopped, the old man said one thing more: "It is not necessary to remain here. Come to my house, which is large, cool, and well supplied with food and wood."

"And fleas," said the officer, turning away.

Yee Ming stood as if he had been slapped, his thin face becoming paler; Su'i Sou, grinning all over his ugly face, was

at his elbow. "We go to your home, old man, and you will prepare a statement to go to every house in the village. I will tell you what to write, and *I* will live in your house now. If you will look behind"—the old man did not—"you will see that I am so important that eight soldiers are given me to command, to do as I say, and to watch you!"

There was nothing more to do. Yee Ming walked slowly homeward. Su'i Sou, coming nearer, began to whisper in his ear, "If you will tell me where you hide your gold, you may send a full quarter of it with your household hidden in rice—"

Yee Ming said, "What a toad's offspring you are!"

Su'i Sou spat in his face.

The man dressed as a temple sweeper, following after the corporal's guard, clenched his hands so tightly that the nails made semi-circular indentations in the palms, but, face gray with anger, did nothing except hurry by a different path toward the house of the Yee family. He was squatting on the doorstep when his father, the renegade and the soldiers reached the house, with a thin bronze begging-bowl on his knee.

Yee Ming said kindly: "There is food in this house. Go to the other door, and say it is to be given you." Then he went inside, and, with Su'i Sou at his side, began to write the order which was to be taken from house to house.

In the kitchen Cheng Li ate rice and pickled shredded cabbage, and in a cold rage listened to noises; the whimpers of the woman as they abandoned household treasures, the sharp wail of a maid-servant as Su'i Sou touched her, the grave admonition of Yee Ming and the renegade's snarled retort. As he listened, his own problem grew and grew until it became monstrous and intolerable.

Weeks before, unknown to the people of Ch'u Shi Koung, men from the Chinese forces had stolen into the town, and, knowing it would become Japanese headquarters should there be a retreat toward the Great Wall, had prepared the banyan tree to be a means of death for those officers who would be encamped about it. Cheng Li had pleaded for the opportunity to be the person who would complete the circuit which would cause the explosion; he had said, "After all, it is my town, and I will be better able to escape for that reason, if I am not blown to bits, than anyone else. Let me be the one. It may mean my honorable father's life, and, since I know about it, if he is killed I will be held accountable by heaven."

Before such an invincible argument his superiors had bowed. And now? Cheng Li knew what would happen following the explosion. Yee Ming, the hostage, would be hanged. If he, Chang Li, failed to set off the charge, he was failing in his duty to China. And if he did, he was killing Yee Ming as surely as if he set a knife in the old man's throat.

If he had been of the older generation, no doubt would have assailed him; every duty would have been to his father. But, even as wars had changed, in China, so had other things changed. "A man has become different," thought Cheng Li. "This may all be clear to my own son when he grows, but even that is of no help to me. I still have enough Old China in me to bow before filial piety rather than my country. I am hesitant. I am filled with doubts.

He paused in his contemplation; he stopped and listened. His name? Called by his wife, in terror? Belying his analysis of himself, he stood up swiftly, and, forgetful of assumed character, strode out of the kitchen. He came face to face with Su'i Sou, who was endeavoring to hold the woman in his arms in the narrow, dark corridor. Anger flared before Cheng Li's eyes, and he seized the renegade's shoulder.

Su'i Sou's knife was out even as he stepped away from the woman, out, and leaping like a silver streak at Cheng Li. The long blade ripped through his left

forearm, stuck a moment as steel rasped against bone, and, in that instant, while the renegade grunted as he tried to get the weapon free, Cheng Li wrested it from his hand. Unheeding of pain, forgetful entirely that a gun was strapped under his rags, he had the point of it in Su'i Sou's throat. He twisted the blade once, and then shoved the renegade back; the stabbed man, windpipe severed as well as artery, was unable to do so much as cry out.

The wife of Cheng Li was sobbing; Yee Ming, appearing in the semidarkness, said, "Pig's blood is sticky. Now there will be trouble, my son. I have always said you should keep your temper. True, he wished your wife, but what is one woman more or less?"

There, Cheng Li knew, spoke the older generation, but he had no time to think about it. His head was very clear; there was one, dim, hazy, chance, and it must taken, since there could be nothing else to do. If only the Japanese guards would remain outside the house!

Without a word of explanation, Cheng Li hurried to his father's own room, and returned with silken trousers and jacket. He dressed the renegade's body in these, and dragged it to the family chamber, where, carefully, he propped it so that it appeared to be kneeling before the family shrine. Then he said, "You, my father are to become a beggar now. A temple sweeper. When sunset comes, if we are still alive, you will accompany the family to the hills, leaving that behind, praying. The women must be ordered to do no wailing for the dead; he is not worth it. He had no soul." He began removing his rags. "At least," he ended, "it will be *doing* something."

Yee Ming's hands were folded stubbornly. "It is better to await death calmly, rather than all this excitement," he said. "Am I to become a temple sweeper in appearance, and die like a dog? Never! I—"

His son, picking up Su'i Sou's clothing, said soberly, "If you do not, I will be hanged to that tree."

"When someone asks a word which Su'i Sou, now in hell, should answer, the ruse will be discovered. It will be long until sunset. Better to take the body and hurl it into the street, and then wait here, in proper contemplation, until we are taken to the death. Our names will become famous. Children will tell the story of Yee Ming and his son Yee Cheng Li—"

"I want to live," said Cheng Li. "I want to fight." He looked straight and tall as he spoke, and there was fire in him. "I have my duty to you, and to China, and," softening, as his father would never have done, "to my wife. Put on the rags, honorable father."

"If I am to die," Yee Ming said fatalistically, "I die as a noble, in silk."

Cheng Li threw every learned precept overboard. "Must I dress you in them?" he asked. "The guards might come in. As for dying, you are not going to die."

"No—I am going to run, like a stoned ape."

"When you run, remember this; behind you will be many who will never run again! For humbling yourself, you will be well avenged, as will the men who are lying on the plain, dead because they hoped to protect this land of ours."

THE sun reached the top of the heavens, and slowly sunk to the westward hills. The household gathered food, and a few tools, directed by Cheng Li. The body of Su'i Sou knelt before the shrine, where any passing Japanese, and the guards outside, could see it. Once or twice Cheng Li, in Japanese, spoke to the guards. When the hour for Fourth Prayer struck, the old bell hit by the ancient priest instead of by a strong young novice, the exodus began. The household of Yee, even the children carrying small sacks of food, joined the others in the narrow central street, and

were herded along toward the open space about the banyan tree. With them was old Yee Ming, head bowed. Many recognized him, but not once was an eyebrow lifted nor a question asked.

Cheng Li, in Su'i Sou's clothing, to which the canny Chinese had added a few jade rings and a gold chain, stepped up to the officers. "The Old Person remains in his house, praying," said Cheng Li. "The guards are with him. He refuses to move until the prayers are finished, and only then if you order. He will not obey me."

An officer glanced at "Su'i Sou," stared briefly, and said a word to a companion. The nasal voice was similar to Su'i Sou's, but, "You stand straighter," the Japanese said, a little doubt in his tone.

"That is because I am no longer a nothing," said Cheng Li, grinning.

"I can see that you have been doing a little stealing," the officer grunted. It was that touch which convinced him. After all, one Chinese looked like another, but it took a renegade to be a thief.

After that, no attention was paid to Cheng Li, although the officer saw to it that the guard was in position about the hostage's house, and that it was reported that the headman knelt before the shrine, deep in prayer.

As Cheng Li watched the examination of the packs, and observed the men of the village, heads low, it came to him that few people would have taken the loss of everything they owned in such manner, and certainly not men as young and strong as most of the male villagers. War, to them, was something left to professional soldiers. If they lost homes and land, it could not be helped. It was ordered by the gods.

He stood in silence, back against the banyan tree, until the black figures of the departing villagers became ants toiling westward toward the barren hills and the glow of the sun. He wondered what his own companions, of the Second Defending Army were doing and faring; they needed arms, they needed, most of all, courage. Some of them, who had seen the Japanese defeated in small skirmishes, had it, and assurance. But most, deep in their hearts, needed to feel that these efficient brown men could be driven out of China. It came to Cheng Li that if he were unable to convince his own friends and villagers that this was possible, that the whole affair was hopeless, and a great sadness suffocated him.

It was a long time before he was again the alert and courageous example of Young China. Then, bowing humbly enough, he asked a seated officer if he might find food.

"When you go for it," the Japanese said, "inform this hostage that he is not to leave his house, and that if he does, his guards will arrest him and he will be chained."

"The person in that house will not leave without permission," said Cheng Li in his guise of the renegade. Under his breath he added, "And it will take the permission of the gods to set him on his feet, also!"

"You," said the officer, "have been useful. You will be paid. If, however, you steal anything more, you will not be paid at all, but will be beaten." As an added precaution, lest the chance of booty prove more entrancing than payment to such a turncoat, the Japanese said, "You are to sleep here, with us, under the tree, and it will be necessary for us to tie you securely."

This was the last thing Cheng Li wanted. Calmly, he said, "If I ran, where would I go? On three sides are your soldiers; on the fourth are the Chinese, who will gladly torture me. I do not wish to be tied." He pulled the rings from his fingers, and the chair from his neck. "Here," he said. "I did not do this because of desire of gain, but because the rings of the Yee family are

rightly mine. Yee Ming is *my* father, even if my mother was—"

The Japanese smiled. "So," he said. "That is different. Sleep where you will."

Cheng Li was jubilant. The lie had done the trick; that, and the Japanese overbearing belief that all Chinese looked, and acted, alike.

Eight o'clock came and passed, and nine. By now the villagers should be crossing the westward river, and starting up the first of the long paths up into the hills. They were not to stop until they reached the third village, where, as a boy, Cheng Li had been sent to contemplate the falling water from a high rock. Here, he had told his father, they were to spend what remained of the night, and if, by morning, he did not join them, they were to continue until such time as they reached what Yee Ming would consider a favorable place to wait. To wait! For what? No crops could be sown, even if patches of land could be found which worth tilling. The food would soon be exhausted. Then winter would come, and unless something were done, or the Japanese retreated, the villagers would starve. Worse, there was no way of knowing how many other villages had been emptied, how many fugitives were in the hills.

By midnight it was black as the pit. For once there was no gleam in the sky, where a town burned, although, like a white sickle, now and again a portable searchlight reaped through the stars, leaving the heavens blacker than before.

Chen Li surveyed the scene about him, as he lay with his back against the banyan tree. The trim officers' tents were ranged in a trim circle, exact. Around the outer edge, a little wearily now, a sentry slouched, bringing up his rifle each time he passed the flag hanging listlessly against staff. Just as it should be. Just as reports said it always was in other villages.

Rising to his knees, Cheng Li slid his hand up the great trunk; unable to reach the crotch, he stood up, pressed against the tree. His hand went into the crotch, seeking. There were the wires, insulated save at the tips, and twisted together. Swiftly, carefully, he moved them apart, and, one in each hand now, watched the sentry pace behind the tents toward the south. He stood motionless. He had, according to instructions, approximately thirty seconds in which to get away. therefor, he must run, pellmell, once he had attached the open wires; therefore, the sentry must be on the eastward side of the tree.

Cheng Li's original plan was to have hidden in the village; everything was altered now. He knew the plain, knew the farms on it, the watercourses, the rises and depressions. Instead of hiding like a jackal, he was going to hunt the hills, and perhaps return to his army, if he was able, with a handful of strong men to bear rifles. Surely, after the loss of their village, they would be willing to join him. And so he would accomplish two things instead of one.

His hands were cold, but firm. He brought the wires together, gave them one twist, and, giving a great instinctive leap, rushed away from the tree. He stumbled and fell; the guard shouted, *"Kore! Kore!"* and then Cheng Li was running fiercely away from the banyan tree, and cursing as he ran. Would they suspect something? Would they, also run from the great century-old banyan, symbol of the village? He tried to count the seconds as he ran through a deserted street, avoiding that one which led past the Yee house, where the guards were squatting around a little fire, avoiding those main ways where sentries might be posted. How long thirty seconds was! Or had the mechanism failed? Or—

There was a glare in the sky, a roaring in Cheng Li's ears; the earth shook under him, as if the thunder god had cleared his throat, and he knew that if death was ahead, through hunger and cold, for his village, that death was also behind

in the ranks of the invaders.

Cheng Li was a full three miles from Ch'u Shi Koung when the first mounted detail hammered past him, going swiftly through the night. He thought, grimly, "That is no way to hunt rabbits, and that is what I am now," and cowered lower in the hollow in Farmer Wang's field. Westward, swiftly, he went, but he was amazed at the activity of the Japanese, and the thoroughness with which the search had started. It appeared probable that the force in Ch'u Shi Koung had set up radio connection with other detachments, for the plain was alive, with horesmen and searchlight-equipped light trucks. "All this," thought Cheng Li, "for one rabbit." Old Yee Ming, disapproving as he would have been at the explosion, certainly should think well of the great commotion which his son had caused. The notion made Cheng Li smile—when there was little enough reason for happiness.

He had the night, what remained of it, to get to the hills, and he made the most of the fleeing hours. Unlike the thirty seconds while he waited for the banyan tree to spread death, time passed leadenly now, but Cheng Li made the best of every instant of it. When daylight began to streak the sky with blue and green ribbons behind him, he was well past the river, and on the hill-path.

It was not until he reached a place where he could look back over the plain that he saw what was going on. "All for one rabbit," he muttered, as he saw men what was gonng on. "All for one rabbit," he muttered, as he saw men coming up the path, saw others spreading out, searching the base of the hills for other paths, for any place up which a man might escape. Then he thought, "I must have killed all of them there, and that is something. I will not mind being captured—if they can catch me."

He was on foot; his followers rode shaggy Manchurian ponies, surefooted and tireless. Not until he reached the first poor mountain village did he consider that he was bringing disaster to the hillmen; he shouted as he approached, "Brothers! Who will sell a soldier a horse? The brown men are coming!"

The headman whimpered, "Why bring them here where there is peace? A horse! We are poor men here, and have only a pig or two—"

Doors were barred, and windows shuttered; Cheng Li ran along, upward, always, with the unpleasant idea burning into him that he was leading the pursuers straight to the fugitives from Ch'u Shi Koung. The sun was up when he reached the third hill-village, to find that his people had already departed. He was barely through the squalid hut-lined street when the first of the pursuers were entering.

PAST the village, the narrowing path plunged at once into a defile, the brawling river in the center, high gloomy rock walls on either side. Without a break the way wound up, hardly more than a thin slice in the loose rock; it was perpendicular above, steep and far to the river. Scarcely any light penetrated to the depths of the gorge.

It was when Cheng Li saw a slowly-moving procession ahead, the fugitives, that the first mounted Japanese leaped from his pony, aimed, and set chips of rock bounding down to the river. It was amazing, the amount of damage which one bullet was able to do, for the impact loosened a considerable mass of earth, which, gathering force and weight from the crumbling friable rock, roared down to finally hiss into the black river below.

Cheng Li, running, heart apound, lungs tortured, thought, "If I found the proper place, I could teach these men from what they have taught me."

He heard the faint sound of bells, broken by the reverberation of another shot, closer to him, and then he was at the end of the procession, where the

women and children stumbled wearily forward; around the next bend, glimpsed a moment before where the path swung wide, Cheng Li had seen the low gateway of another hill-village. He called loudly, his voice hammering back and forth in the ravine: "Yee Ming!"

The voice came back, "Yee Minggggg!" in a long roll; then he heard, in his father's level tones, "The gate is locked. Here we die. Let us prepare!"

Cheng Li did not intend to die, but what else was there for him to do? The women were packed solidly on the trail before him; behind, the Japanese were advancing, and what they would do to him he knew only too well. For a moment the fatalistic and non-resistant training of his youth welled up in him, and he almost knelt, to wait on the path until death came to him, Then, furiously, he looked over the edge of the path, where, in a series of zigzags, he could see the pursuers, ponies straining, guns ready. One of the Japanese, looking up, raised his rifle, and clipped loose rock from behind Cheng Li's shoulders; before the first bits of it struck the narrow path and bounded down, the young Chinese had seized an iron-bladed shovel from a woman's shoulder.

He was beside himself now. The predicament of the villagers had been his doing. Why had he followed them into the hills? Hadn't he known that these men were peasants, not made for fighting, and that they would be slaughtered like oxen? Hadn't he known all this before? He had, and it enraged him more. With the shovel he began to strike furious blows on the edge of the path. What did he intend? Possibly nothing more than to create a gap beyond which the Japanese would be unable to pass; possibly he meant to make their advance less easy. At all events, he smashed away at the loess of the path's edge.

Dirt, rocks, slipped down . . . more, and more, setting a mass of earth to moving, straight toward the lower zigzags of the path where the Japanese rode upward. One of the astonished pursuers, frightened, fired at the women, and one of the fugitives sank down, clutched at the edge of the path, and, falling, slipping, added more rock, more soft dirt, to the growing avalanche.

Cheng Li screamed, "You kill women! *Sha!*" He dragged out his forgotten automatic, firing wildly at the Japanese. "*Sha!* Kill! Kill!"

The horsemen below, not knowing where the landslide would fall, unable to turn their horses easily on the narrow ledge, could only do one thing; they spurred forward along the path, and squarely into the slide caused by the falling woman's body. Dust and rock covered what happened like a gray-black mantle; there were screams of fear, rage and terror, intermingled, in the black chasm. There was a roar of sound, ending in terrific noise as the gigantic mass, rock, ponies, soft dirt, and men struck the bottom of the ravine, tearing everything before it, cutting through the zigzag paths. The water boiled up, higher and higher, until it foamed over the newly-made barrier, and then, with dust rising high, like a cloud of insects, the mountain river shot down in a splatter of silver toward the warlike plain below.

Then, suddenly, harshly, there was a great silence in the chasm.

Cheng Li was very tired. He threaded his way forward, past the women and children, to where old Yee Ming was bowing in the dirt, near the gateway. The old Chinese finished his prayer, and then stood up. He said slowly, "You see what the gods have done for us, my son? At the last moment, they saved us. The earth-god, angered, opened his hand, and cast the assailants into the river." Smilingly, "Soon we will return to the village and set up the altars before the banyan tree, and everything will be as before."

"The banyan tree," said Cheng Li, "is gone."

"How?"

Quietly, "It vanished, with a great noise—in smoke and fire. Many of the invaders departed with it. It was lifted to heaven." He looked about, at the cowed villagers, waiting humbly until the gates of the hill-town would be opened, prepared to squat down and await death here and now if necessary.

"The gods," said Yee Ming, "are very good to us. We will plant another seed. and a thousand years from now there will be another banyan tree. You see, my son, what it is to trust the gods?"

He said, "I see, my father," and, with the others, waited until the gate was finally opened. He squatted down against a wall, too tired to move, eat or speak further; he was there a long time, while Yee Ming discussed possibilities with the headman of the village; he was almost asleep when a man from Ch'u Shi Koung, a lean fellow with broad shoulders and pockmarked face, slipped up to him, and asked a question; "Yee Cheng Li, you saw the god reach down and hurl the brown men from the path to save us all?"

"He saw," said Yee Ming. "*I* saw."

Cheng Li bowed. The centuries seemed to batter him down. He said, "Yes. I saw." He wondered, without greatly caring, what phantom his father's old eyes had shown the older man.

There were many villagers about the two Yee men. The pockmarked man said slowly, half apologetically, "A woman told me that *you* killed the brown invaders. Is that true, Cheng Li?"

"At least they are dead," said Cheng Li.

Another villager, with a new grim note in his voice, said pleadingly, "If you, one man, can remove fifty of them from life, what could many of us do? If we must trust to the gods, it is well to bow the head and pray, but—but it was my wife who was killed, Cheng Li."

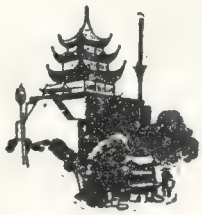
"She has been well avenged by the gods," said Yee Ming.

The pockmarked man said deferentially, "She might be avenged more greatly. The brown men can be killed. Cheng Li has shown us that. These brown men—Must we wait for the gods to remove them? They have stolen too many of our villages already." He paused, and then went on more quickly. "These people here, they say that there is another way to the plain. It is a long way, and hard, but perhaps if you led us, perhaps peasants could fight as well as lords! Perhaps it is a good thing for men to protect their homes. Perhaps—"

Cheng Li was on his feet. His eyes flamed, and Yee Ming, watching, felt a sudden and great pride in his son.

"*Hai-ya*," shouted Cheng Li, all of his weariness gone. "What is this talk of lords, of peasants? We are all men! We will fight, and then soon there will be peace of our own making."

The little temple-bell sang again, announcing the hour of second rice, and the brazen echo filled the narrow, dark ravine, shuddering over the low huts, climbing up higher and higher until the sound bounded back and forth from wall to wall. Even as Cheng Li bowed in prayer, he saw that the peasants were standing straighter. They were, he felt, not defying the gods, but had discovered they were men.



Where readers and writers
and adventurers
meet

THE CAMP-FIRE

SOME words about George Bruce, who knows flying as few authors do.

He has been identified with flying since 1912. During that time he has seen airplanes grow out of the box kite stage, controlled by warping wings, and powered by cast iron four cylinder motors turning hand carved wooden propellers motivated by bicycle chains, to the present four hundred mile an hour racers. In that time, airplane design reversed itself. In the old days, the present empennage was out in front, and the box kites flew backwards, with rudder, elevators, etc., in front of the pilot.

The outstanding period in his experience were those years when he was a member of the most famous flying organization in the world . . . The Gates Flying Circus. He believes that organization did more to make the people of the United States flying conscious than any other. For seven years, 1922-29, the Gates Circus was the greatest outdoor attraction in the country. On its roster it carried the names of some of the finest pilots in the world: Ashcraft, Steele, Dixon, MacKinney, Krantz, Gardner, Pangborn, and others who have since flown west, or on to greater renown. The Gates Flying Circus visited practically every city in the United States with a population of ten thousand or more, and hundreds with less than ten thousand. Day after day it carried on the breathtaking, almost impossible routine, and day after day it left people tense with aching necks, from watching real, honest-to-God daredevils do things with airplanes which were in those days miraculous. It jumped out of cow pastures and sub-divisions. There were no landing fields or conveniences such as present day fliers enjoy. It carried its fuel in trucks, and it was a self-contained unit.

To be a member of the Gates Flying Circus was the goal of every pilot in the country, and the dream of every youth who desired to sprout wings.

The Gates organization carried two million passengers without scratching one. It flew millions of hours without a fatality to pilot or passenger. And it operated the old Hisso-Standard before the advent of pedigreed gas and oil. It did "stunts" which no organization has so far dared to repeat.

It passed from the scene with the advent of the Department of Commerce regulations against stunt flying. When it passed an epoch in flying came to an end.

These carrier stories are written because Bruce believes that carrier flying

is the most fascinating, colorful, intense operation of aircraft extant.

"The ordinary day of a carrier pilot riots with color and adventure," says Bruce. "He never knows when he leaves the deck of a carrier if he will return. His flying hours are spent taking a ship off a hundred foot runway, ninety feet wide, and putting it back on the same space. His flying world is liquid, even to the nature of his landing field. He works amid an inferno of noise and motion. An inferno which is more efficient and more closely governed than any organization of any nature in the world. When he flies off the carrier . . . the carrier runs away from him . . . and it is his problem to find it again. He must be at one time a pilot skilled far above the ordinary meaning of the term, a magician, a mathematician of high order, a completely accurate navigator without the aid of navigating instruments and with his navigating based on split seconds and speeds of better than one hundred and fifty miles per hour. He must be a trained observer and gunner, and a nerveless fighting pilot.

"And the strange thing. He is merely a passenger aboard the carrier! He is not a member of the carrier's company, and neither is his airplane. He has no command, no duties to perform excepting to fly when he is ordered. When the ship heads for port he is told to 'get going.' He is launched into the air . . . miles from land, and is expected to find his base without the carrier's help. When the carrier leaves port to go to sea, he is ordered to 'rendezvous' with the carrier for the purpose of being taken aboard at sea. . . . How many miles at sea is a matter for the skipper of the carrier to determine. So, he flies out to sea, to locate and land on his 'floating toothpick.'

"All in all, it's a merry life," he says. 'And if there is any glory, or romance or color left in the drab business of every-day flying, it is aboard the great *Saratoga, Lexington* and *Ranger*. The pilots flying from the carriers would be the last in the world to admit the presence of any of those things. . . . But after all, that's the Navy!"

WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES is writing about an old friend and boss when he writes about Dirty Lewis. He explains:

Engineman Wylie Wyndham "Dirty" Lewis, introduced to *Adventure* readers in "The Cock-Eyed Truth," is not wholly a character of fictitious conception. As a matter of fact there is a gentleman up in Montana with frost over his ears who may be reading this as you read and saying to himself, "Wull, dang him, he's sure layin' it into me. He's puttin' it down on paper about the way I used to play jokes on people, only I never tied into a movie star that way. Them milk cans? Yes, that happened to me. Hell, yes. An' more, too, an' now what is Bill Hayes goin' to bring up next and tell the whole country about? If I could only git that dumb fireman back heavin' coal for me, I'd work him so hard he'd keep his mouth shut, he'd be so wore out."

Of course his name isn't Lewis. He's a great scout, however, and back in my firing days he took me for more than one fast ride. The years have tamed him, perhaps, but they also have made the memories of him richer —memories of his fearlessness, his expert touch of throttle and air, his vastly warped sense of humor.

Every year I say I'll leave the railroad with my fiction. I'll go to other fields. But then Lewis and those other glamorous characters crowd in on me. They won't let me out of mental hearing of the clang and pound of steel on steel, the blur of stack exhaust, the blur of polished rods. From way down in Campeche, Mexico, up into Canada I've known the steel and the men who move over it. They're hard to get away from.

A GOOD letter arrived from L. W. Martin of Los Angeles, even if it did peel off some editorial hide.

I have been basking by the Camp-Fire since 1913. And I have a file of *Adventures* that runs back to 1924 stored away in a trunk, so, perhaps, it's my turn to come forward with a few sticks of dry birch to brighten the blaze and a handful of green balsam to smudge mosquitoes.

I rejoiced when Adventure went to three times a month even if it did go a little highbrow with stories like "Web of the Sun" and "Frombombo." When it took on the appearance of a "nickel thriller" and dropped to once a month I began to worry lest a pal was about to expire. Then came the announcement that the Old *Adventure* of Tuttle, Friel, Lamb and MacCreagh was coming back! That adventurous heroes like One-Two Mac, Sled Wheeler, Don Everhard and a host of others who pitted their brawn and brains against man, beast and nature, and won, would grace the pages was certain, for that was the Old *Adventure;* a magazine which I used to read from cover to cover, aloud, to my family!

I have laughed at many an accusation in Camp-Fire that *Adventure* was spouting propaganda of one sort or another. Now I charge that for over fifteen years *Adventure* has been printing many stories that literally kick the pants off adventure with hob-nailed boots! "Dust and Sun" did its best to debunk the "William Walker" kind of adventure. Then there is the long string of Foreign Legion stories that are nothing but blood and heat and brutality with somebody's guts messing up the sand. And never did the entrails belong to the man who should have

lost them. Perhaps they are good stories, but they are off the *Adventure* Trail. Very good propaganda to keep some young American from trying to join the Legion as a soldier of fortune, for there isn't a hero in the lot, although there are plenty of low grade villains! The men who turn out this stuff are such good writers that I am sure they could give us adventure stories with a glamorous character whom we could accompany while he fights his way to a worth while win.

Nason's war stuff nearly caused me to drop the magazine. Two of my closest friends *enlisted;* one in the Marines and the other in the regulars. Perhaps they were fools to do it, but they were not the kind of fool Nason depicted the A.E.F. personnel to be. And they paid the price. More power to Nason for debunking war but it was Off the *Adventure* Trail.

Let us look at the October first issue now on the stands. Is it *Adventure* from cover to cover? "Lagoon Loot" is a border line tale. Some adventure but smacking of allegory with a political flavor. "Just Another Jones" is a little blood-and-thunderish but real adventure. "Knockout in the Sticks" is well done but hasn't an ounce of adventure in it. "Salute" is the same old Legionnaire tripe. I felt sorry for the pig in such company. "Barry's Hat" is highbrow, but adventure. "Stolen Heads" is another story that debunks adventure. Pettengill had the earmarks of a hero until he tried to acquire by theft the most precious possessions of the aborigines. The traders did little except shoot savages to save their own hides, and they put over some cynical philosophy about the ways of white men in "civilizing" natives. Probably true enough, but is it adventure? Isn't there enough depression without having it thrust on us in the guise of fiction? These stories are good in themselves and show real craftsmanship but I maintain that they are Off the *Adventure* Trail. The remainder of this issue is up to *Adventure's* standard.

There's my pile of fuel. If it brightens the flame, or smudges one 'skeeter from the face of an old friend, the effort has been worth while.

—L. W. MARTIN.

P. S. If anyone wants that ten years' gathering of *Adventures* I'm open to trade for cash or a good gun.

FROM Charles H. Coe come some interesting comments on the art of knife-throwing:

I have been an interested reader of the comments of Capt. R. E. Gardner and J. T. Howard, in Camp-Fire, on the subject of knife throwing. I agree with the former that "there is no authentic record of a thrower who could throw over a varied course, at a moving target, with any assurance whatever that the point would strike home."

Nevertheless, if the object is moving parallel to the thrower, within certain limits—which vary with one's expertness—sticking the knife is not difficult to an expert. A fairly good knife thrower can make successful sticks up to 20 feet, which is about the limit of successful throws with a good throwing knife. With a bayonet successful sticks have been accomplished up to about forty feet. But whichever weapon is used, as Capt. Gardner says, "proficiency in knife throwing is secured only after countless hours of countless practice. . . ."

In my youth I spent a lot of time trying to emulate the Mexican knife throwers, with more or less success—generally less! I do not remember how many knives I ruined and trees damaged in my experiments, but it surely was a few!

Within the past ten years—my time being my own—I have renewed my early experiments, using various knives. I became so expert that I could stick a playing card four times out of five, at 20 feet. It is a mistake to think that only heavy knives must be used. It all depends upon the target used. If a large pasteboard carton, filled with sawdust or tanbark, is the target, any ordinary hunting knife, having a sharp point, may be thrown and stuck without injury to the implement. If the target is a plank or a tree, the knife must have a thick blade and a strong handle, otherwise the vibration will ruin the blade when stuck. This vibration causes the metal to crystallize, in which case it breaks easily.

Three years ago the Marble Arms and Manufacturing Company, of Gladstone, Mich., sent me two knives they had made for throwing. These models they asked me to try out, saying: "We will be glad to have you give these any test you desire, even altering same if necessary, to secure the proper design." I gave them an exhaustive trial and found one admirable for throwing. In returning them I suggested that a small circular pit be added each side of the point of one of the knives in which to receive the tips of the forefinger and thumb when poised for throwing. They adopted my suggestion and returned the knife for further experimentation. The little pits worked to a charm, enabling me to grasp the point more securely, completely avoiding slipping when the cast was made. I returned the knife with my approval, since which time I have not heard from the firm. I do not know whether or not they made the knife in quantities and placed it on the market. But I think it would pay them to do so.

I had an article in *Adventure*, Jan. 15, 1931 entitled "The Art of Knife Throwing," in which the principle and practice of knife throwing were explained quite fully. A certain lady read the article and wrote me asking if I thought she could learn to throw a knife; said she and another lady were going

to a foreign country and she thought a knife would be good protection.

In my reply I stated that a knife was very poor protection; that if one's first throw was a miss, the weapon would be lost or out of reach; that a small revolver was what she ought to carry, if she needed a weapon. I never heard from her again, so guess (and hope) she gave up the idea.

Throwing from the palm of the hand is a very poor substitute for grasping it by the point, and little satisfaction will be had if that method is learned. But, as Capt. Gardner truly says, "there are no short cuts" in learning this interesting pastime.

A READER wants a partner for a fresh-water pearl expedition.

For a good many years I have been interested in prospecting for fresh-water pearls, and I thought that perhaps some reader of this Department could give me additional information on this subject, and probably join me on a prospecting trip.

Fresh-water pearls are found in mussels, which are also known as clams, and they inhabit most of the fresh-water lakes and streams throughout the United States. Genuine pearls bring a good price and there is always a ready market for same. I believe two could make good money by working as they would at a regular job. And, too, the joy of camping out and living in the open would be worth a great deal to anyone.

I am single, 25 years of age, and I would like to hear from anyone, young or old, who would be interested in an outing of this kind. I promise to answer all letters.

—ALVIN H. MARSHALL, Silver Lake, Texas.

CAN any reader give information about "dew ponds" for the benefit of George J. Little of Paterson, N. J., who writes:

I recall that at one time many years ago I came across an article in some publication wherein it gave a description of the "dew ponds" of England. It explained how they obtained pure water in some of the rural districts. Do you know anything about this phenomenon?

FROM S. W. Calkins of San Pedro, Calif., comes a little anecdote. Perhaps publication will cause the story to be finished for him.

I have just concluded some correspondence that I think will be of interest to you, as evidence of the many niches into which *Adventure* finds its way. Unfortunately, my little story is unfinished, so I can't tell you whether the ending has been happy or not.

Nearly two years ago I wrote and *Adventure* published a short article on gambling, based on the business as legally conducted in Nevada. In it I used the real names of two veteran gamblers in that state.

One day several weeks ago I received a much-forwarded letter from a little town in Montana, written by a woman who had stumbled on that issue of *Adventure* while reading back numbers of several magazines accumulated in her home.

She recognized one of the two names used as the same as that borne by a cousin from whom she had not heard since childhood. He had been a gambler in Alaska and the west, she said, but had not been heard from for years. She asked me to help her get in touch with him, in the hope that the man I mentioned was her relative.

Needless to say, I wrote her at once to give her the last address I had for the man in question. At the same time I wrote him of her query. Since my letter to him has not been returned, I assume it reached its destination.

Not long ago I heard from the lady again. She thanked me most sincerely for the information I had given her, and said that she was writing him by the same mail. My sketchy information as to his past life checked with what she knew of him, she added, and she was therefore hopeful of a happy reunion.

Since that time I have heard from neither of these people, but have often wondered if *Adventure* has been the means of bringing them together again. As I say, the story is as yet unfinished . . . but at least we know that this lady in Montana received her first glimmer of hope in many years, from *Adventure*. I have asked her to keep me informed, and will be glad to pass on to you any further news I get of this interesting little incident.

THE yarn by W. C. Tuttle about nicknames, published in the September 15th Camp-Fire, brings this choice list from Edward L. Crabb of Shoshoni, Wyoming. We hope no toes are being trampled here, because Mr. Crabb didn't tell us which of these people don't like the names that have been fastened or plastered on them.

Mr. Tuttle's remarks on queer names led me to make up this list of nicknames which I have met here in Central Wyoming. Some of them have been borne by very prominent politicians and other well known men and many of them are still in use.

Bones Rice, Big Bear, Butch Cassidy, Bean Belly, Blind Bill Carson, Black Prince, Black Wolf, Boston Billy Horton, Brown Kid, Black George, The Bell Wether, Alibi Griffith, Big Nose George, Arapahoe Dave, Alkali Sam, Curleys of all kinds, Crooked Nose

Jack, Coyote Bill, Cherokee Jim, Dirty Jack P. D. Kid, Diamond L. Slim (lynched some years ago), Dab, Deafy Fisher, Deafy Miller, Eat 'Em Up Sam, Forty-five Ninety, Hardwinter Davis, Kidney Foot, Magpie Sam, Jawbone Jackson, Iron Jaw Lewis, Cranky Hank, Legs, Maverick Bill, The Holy Father, Latigo McNally, Monk Lamoreaux, Old Baldy, Long Shorty, Nebraska, Old Tuck, Never Sweat Clark, Poor Fox, Pistol Foot Bill, Red Fox, Pecos, Happy Jack Allen (U. S. marshal), Pinto Joe, Colorado Patten (U. S. marshal), Missou Hines, Powder River, and Pretty George West, supposed originals of Owen Wister's Virginian, Pampas, original of Wister's Trampas, Pistol Billy, several of them, Red, Tex, Suicide Smith, Dusty Jim, Stud Horse Bill, Slim's of all kinds, Suicide Johnson, Dogy Steed, Rattlesnake Charlie, Rattlesnake Bill, Wild Cat Sam, Mormon Jack, Swayback Sally, Swivel Eye Joe, Sagebrush Bill, Sagebrush Nancy, Step and a half Tom, Tough Miller, Suffering Tom, Suffering Jim, Windy of many varieties and colors, Two by Four, Rocky Mountain Shorty, innumerable Texes.

Could give you many more but this is sufficient.

Yours sincerely,

—Edw. L. Crabb, Shoshoni, Wyoming.

THOSE nicknames remind me of a man I have wondered about—Frisco Pat Murphy. The world has a number of Frisco Pat Murphys, I have since learned, but this one has a little blue exploding bombshell tattooed on his forehead, and he had the cot next to mine for a couple of weeks in 1926 in a bunkhouse at the American Falls, Idaho, job of building a dam. He was a sailor, and he left via freight for New Orleans where he hoped to get a warm job on a banana boat for the winter. He had once been awarded a heroism medal for saving a man trapped in a flooded hold, and he had sold the medal on South Street, New York City, to buy some drinks.

Once at American Falls he drank too much and was put in the jail overnight. The jail's kangaroo court accused him of breaking in, and sentenced him to turn over everything he had in his pockets. The judge of the court was a bootlegger.

"No damn bootlegger," said Pat, "is going to get my cigarettes," and he laid the whole court low with some swings of a chair.

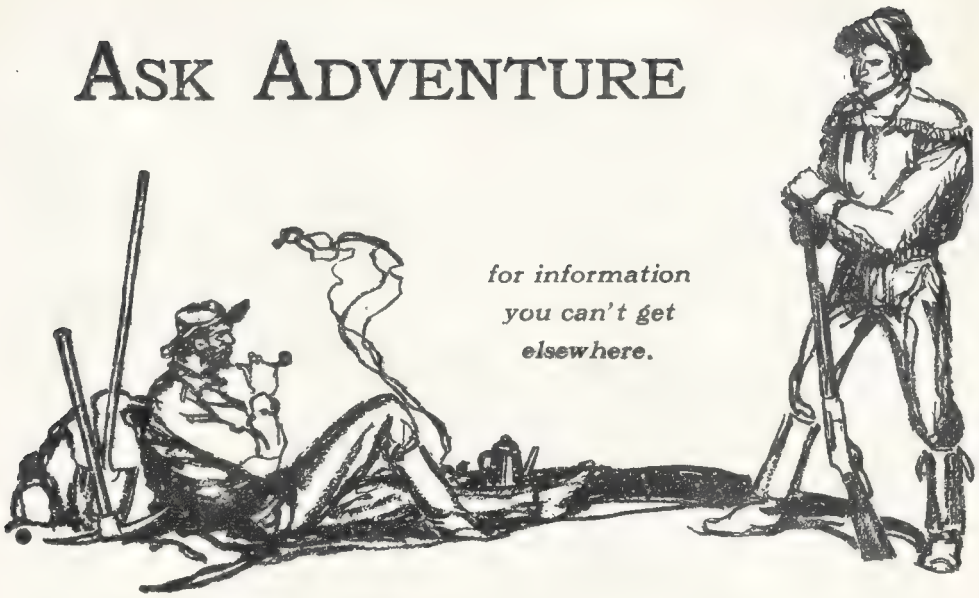
He used to sit a-straddle a box in the bunkhouse and tell about the South Seas —the only real place in the world, according to Pat. We had an ex-sheepherder Charlie, who had gone without a human audience so long he liked to talk largely, but Pat would only listen a moment, spit on his hands, and cut him short to turn the subject back to those coconut isles.

After work Pat and I usually walked across the flat to the old town of American Falls, then wrecked and soon to be flooded, to see—another nickname—the Sagebrush King. He was an ancient prospector who lived with a stray cat in a vegetable cellar. The only sound building then standing in the old town was the former jail, which had become a hangout for hoboes. The Sagebrush King and his cat kept apart from them. He would tell us with a glittering eye of some rich strikes he had made, and, with his eye still glittering, how one of the cooks in the camp kitchen held some food out for him every day. A friend he mourned was a prairie chicken that got into the habit of visiting the lonesomest desert prospect the Sagebrush King ever had. It came out of the brush before sundown, and every day when the King knocked off work he kept his eye out for the bird. There wasn't any other company, because he and his burros didn't have anything to talk about any more. He got the bird pretty tame, and then one evening it didn't appear. Nor the next and next. Some coyote got it, he figured, and a week later the Sagebrush King packed up and left—he said it was too lonesome even for him.

Some sea-faring readers may have come across Frisco Pat Murphy. He would be in his early fifties now. If he is sitting under a palm tree in the South Seas, facing the world with two squinting blue eyes and a blue bombshell like a third one, tattoed on his forehead, and perhaps telling them stories about Idaho, the news would be good to hear.

H. B.

ASK ADVENTURE



for information you can't get elsewhere.

THE strange "Hagar" tribe of razor blade cannibals sends a representative to a street carnival.

Request:—A street carnival once played at our town and one of the chief attractions was a negro who claimed to be of the "Hagar" tribe and was brought from about 50 or 60 miles from Johannesburg, South Africa. He was about 6 feet 1 inch tall, weighed about 185 lbs., was light brown with a reddish tint, and ate live chickens, spiders, rattlesnakes, old razor blades and electric light bulbs. His teeth were perfectly smooth and white.

The lecturer with him claimed that all the natives of this tribe ate glass and any bright objects they could find and were cannibals. He claimed that this man was no freak but was a normal specimen of this tribe.

He ate about 12 razor blades and the heart, liver and gizzard of two or three chickens and one or two rattlesnakes each night while on exhibition here.

Some of our doctors were suspicious of a trick and took him to a hospital and X-rayed his stomach and the blades and glass were actualiy in his stomach.

My impression was that cannibals had sharp filed teeth, and would eat a white man as quick as they would a native, while this showman claimed that there was no record of a cannibal ever eating a white man, and that a white man was safer in Africa than in the United States of America. Also I have never heard of cannibals eating glass.

Do these African natives eat glass, and will they eat white men, are there any cannibals within 60 miles of Johannesburg, and do cannibals have filed teeth or not?

—O. L. BAILEY, Selma, N. C.

Reply by Capt. F. J. Franklin:—I am of the opinion that the razor blade swallowing negro hailed from Coney Island, Harlem, or the Bronx. There is no such tribe or native race in South Africa as the "Hagar" tribe. It is not on record that there ever existed a tribe of cannibals in South Africa. You are quite right in your belief that a white man is safer in Africa than in the United States. Today in Johannesburg you can see a mule team and wagon driven by a native proceeding slowly along the main streets, the mule wagon loaded with bars of gold from the mines and en route to the railroad depot. They are never molested.

Your colored glass eater may have swallowed the razor blades, but I don't believe you could induce a South African native to swallow anything but good food. I have seen very few natives in Africa with filed teeth, these natives having done so to enhance their beauty. I wish, however, I could find a Hagar man who would swallow my discarded razor blades as I find difficulty in disposing of them.

ONE of man's oldest problems—how to keep the tent from leaking.

Request:—Several years ago I read an account of a serviceable tent made out of "factory cotton" or unbleached muslin after which it was immersed in a solution which made it waterproof.

I have forgotten the formula for the solution which I think was a combination of gasoline and paraffin.

Is the idea feasible and what solution is used?

—JOHN B. HART, Bronx, N. Y.

Reply by Mr. Paul M. Fink:—The waterproofing method to which you referred is what we call the paraffin process, and has proven very successful, used with a light, tightly woven fabric. It is applied after the tent is made up.

For a tent about 7 x 9 use two pounds of paraffin to two gallons of turpentine. Shave the paraffin into small pieces and dissolve in the turpentine, *heated in a water bath, not over an open fire.* In the meantime pitch the tent, in a sunny spot if possible. Using a stiff brush, paint it with the mixture, working it into the cloth thoroughly, with special attention to the seams. Leave the tent up until it has thoroughly dried, then go over it with a hot iron to drive the paraffin deeper into the fibers. This may have to be renewed every few years if the tent gets much service. I have used it successfully on several tents, and if the red gods be willing expect to sleep under one of them this weekend.

A PROSPECTOR'S paradise. In New Zealand the government helps with advice, even tools and food.

Request:—Can you give me information about prospectors and gold-miners in unemployed schemes in New Zealand? Are beginners financed in any way? How is this side of the affair worked. Regarding living quarters, is each individual allotted a camp to himself or does he have to go where there is room? Are tools, blankets, etc., supplied or are these to be found by the worker?

—A. D. JOHNSTON, Waverly, New Zealand.

Reply by Mr. Tom L. Mills, Feilding, New Zealand, Feilding Star Office:—In no other country of equal size to New Zealand are indications of a greater number of economic minerals to be found. The gold mining industry which really started the development of the Dominion by bringing people from all ends of the earth to settle on the land has been in abeyance for decades. It has taken the depression to send men seeking gold again and they are doing it with success. As to your direct question in no other country does the State offer such liberal and varied assistance to miners and prospectors with expert advice, tools and money and rations. Naturally you cannot go out on your own if you are not experienced in minerals. But there are bulletins on the subject giving full directions as to prospecting and camping.

Write the Under-Secretary, Mines Department, Wellington, New Zealand. Ask him for goldmining pamphlets and the latest information regarding help for prospectors and how you can go about seeking gold either in the Waihi and Thames area or down to West Coast of the South Island. *Kea Ora!*

GETTING the sharks seems to be a small problem. But only salt on the tail will keep 'em.

Request:—"I would like to get an idea how to cure shark skins, and where I might find a market for the cured and the green skins?"

—RICHARD MERCER, New York, N. Y.

Reply by Mr. Seth Bullock:—If you are planning to secure shark skins for sale to the manufacturers of leather goods, the simplest way is by the use of salt. All that is necessary is to remove the skin as soon as possible, scrape all flesh and fat remaining on it and cover it liberally with ordinary salt. Use plenty so that the salt will absorb the moisture in the skin and lay the skin meanwhile in a dry shaded place. By no means dry it in the sun as the moisture will not have a chance to be drawn out by the salt. As the salt becomes damp, remove it and keep adding dry salt until you are sure that it has absorbed all the moisture in the skin. Allow it to thoroughly dry in the shade when it will be ready for shipment, or can be kept in this condition indefinitely until you have a number to be sent. In locating a market your best bet would be to get in touch with some shoe manufacturer. It would not be advisable to ship green skins as there would be the everpresent hazard of spoiling in transit.

IN SOUTH AFRICA, where lawyers are scarce, there is a different system—"law agents."

Request:—Will you please tell me what a "Law Agent in South Africa" is. We have our insurance agents and real estate agents in the United States but I should like to know the exact status of a "Law Agent in South Africa."

—L. A. KAPSA, Chicago, Ill.

Reply by Capt. F. J. Franklin:—A "law agent" I would describe as follows: In the sparsely settled districts of South Africa far removed from railroads, lawyers are few and far between. There is always however a resident magistrate who is a trained lawyer but does not practice. A law agent is appointed, duly licensed, he may be a local store keeper or an insurance, or a real estate man. Through him the local farmers do their business. He consults the lawyers by mail in the large towns where he has connections with large law firms. A law agent becomes almost a lawyer after years of experience,

and I have known men in South Africa who would rather take advice from a law agent than from a real lawyer.

THE seal and the porpoise never raced for a cup. But they make plenty of knots.

Request:—I wish to find out how fast a seal can swim. I have heard that they can attain a speed of 80 miles per hour. Is this true?

—F. W. WASHINGTON.

Reply by Mr. Karl P. Schmidt:—I have no great amount of information available on the speed of swimming of seals. Captain Bartlett, in the Journal of Mammalogy, volume 8, page 212, writes of the maximum speed of the Newfoundland hooded seal as 20 miles per hour. The same species makes a nine hundred mile migration along the Labrador coast in about sixty days, or only 15 miles per day.

Of course there are numerous kinds of seals, and the fur seals and sea lions of the Pacific are quite different from the true seals. I doubt if they can travel much faster than the true seals. Porpoises, which are much more perfectly stream-lined than seals, can swim rings around a steamer going at 14 knots; they must be able to make bursts of speed much greater than 20 miles per hour.

THE smaller examples of the simian species could be cute house pets.

Request:—Am I right in surmising that the marmoset is a native of South America? Would you please give me the proportions of this monkey, also its feeding habits, actions, and whether a pet can be made of it? And is there any place in the United States where they can be purchased? And what is their approximate weight in regard to shipping them?

—IRVING HODSON, New Bedford, Mass.

Reply by Mr. Edgar Young:—The marmoset is a native of northern South America, Panama, Central America, and southern Mexico.

I have never weighed a marmoset but some of them are very small and any of them can be easily carried in the coat pocket without any trouble. As small as they look to be they are smaller than that for the body within the fur is quite diminutive. They are very intelligent, large bright eyes, and in the tropics they make a very fine pet. I have seen several brought up here from Panama but, due to non-resistance to our climate all that I personally know about soon died. In the zoos where they have things fixed up for them they manage to keep them indefinitely.

Their habits are similar to that of monkeys and lemurs. They chatter shrilly when angry or annoyed, are affectionate to the extreme, and their diet while meager is the same as other members of the monkey tribe. They will eat flies, small insects, nuts, tropical fruits, bits of meat and bread, etc.

Most of the large zoos know where animals of this sort can be purchased, and I have little doubt the Curator of the Bronx Park Zoo, New York, can refer you to some one who sells them in the tropics or perhaps here. If you knew some employee on a ship that passes through the Panama Canal you could get him to get you one and bring it up. The United Fruit Co. (131 State St., Boston) run a fleet of ships down that way and any steward or deck hand could get one to you easily. Handlers of pets in New York City now and then have them for sale as they get them in.

THE S.S. *Merida*, sunken off the Virginia with $1,000,000 in gold bullion and crown jewels protected, according to old legend, by a double curse.

Request:—"We would ask what information you can give us about the Ward S. S. *Merida*, sunk in collision off the Virginia coast, in 1911.

We have made considerable effort to get official corroboration of the existence of treasure aboard the *Merida*. We have communications from the Ward Line, the Insurance Adjusters on the cargo, the Board of Underwriters of New York, and the Director General of Customs of Mexico. This last official informs us that the official papers, relative to the *Merida* have been destroyed by fire. The net result from the others is nil.

Manifestly, to justify the expenditure of the very considerable sum of money required to salvage the *Merida* it is necessary to have very definite assurance of the value of the cargo. And we are asking you if you have this or can tell us where it can be obtained."

—W. L. NEWELL, Seattle, Wash.

Reply by Lieut. H. E. Riesenberg:—The treasure-gold of the *Merida*—New York and Cuba mail (Ward) liner—with more than $1,000,000 in gold bullion, including the crown jewels of the Hapsburg ruler Emperor Maximilian, unhappy monarch of Mexico who was assassinated by a firing squad in 1867, lies seventy miles off the Virginia Capes, encrusted with barnacles, strangely quiet, schedules and time-tables no longer to meet; chronometers, dividends and whirring propellers long forgotten.

The steamer set sail from Mexico some twenty-three years ago when one of the country's many revolutions sent President Diaz fleeing from his palace. It was her last voyage, for she went down off the Capes of Virginia, her treasure protected, according

to an old legend by a double curse. If this ancient tale can be believed, it was this wealth of Emperor Maximilian that was cursed—and double cursed—because some of it was looted from the sacred Temple of Rama in Burma and the rest of it was filched from an Aztec temple in the jungles of Mexico. The high priests of both of these holy places are rumored to have invoked the anger of their gods against anyone who laid hands on their treasures. Perhaps these curses had nothing to do with the tragic death of the Emperor Maximilian, or with the insanity of Charlotte, his empress.

Very probably it was just the luck of the sea that the *Merida* was rammed and sunk before she could get half way from Mexico to some safe port in Europe. But the fact remains that the salvagers, on each of the two determined attempts, had a hectic time of it and received no reward whatever for their efforts. Operations were under way to retrieve these riches from their watery grave, while the crew of the salvage vessels, for many months during two summers, tossed in the heavy seas that roll off these Capes. These men were little affected by the old superstitions that, in the minds of many people who were familiar with the lore of Maximilian's ill-gotten loot, doomed their enterprise from the start. They were realists and were concerned only with the rich profits that they thought would be obtained when they finally located the ship's safe and hauled it from the rusted and barnacled hulk. The treasure was within reach, and that strange madness that grips men when gold in untold amounts is at stake permeated the surroundings—then, they finally did locate that long-sought strong-box and brought it to the surface—and they were almost ready to take stock in the "double-curse" when, to their disappointment, they saw that the big iron chest was already open, and empty.

What happened to those ill-fated treasures of the Emperor is a mystery that is yet to be solved. Perhaps the safe was rifled before the ship sank and, possibly, the "double-cursed" riches never were raised at all—possibly never stowed in the strong-box as was reported, but hidden somewhere else about the hold of the steamer. Maybe the long-dead priests of the Burmese and the Aztecs, as some superstitious people believe, are still on the job guarding their treasures. But, regardless of all this, the official ship's records show that this treasure and the jewels to have been placed on board the steamer when she left Mexico—and were, no doubt, there when she sank.

Another expedition, under the direction of Captain Harry L. Bowdoin, of Whitestone, N. Y., lured again by these riches and still retaining faith in the possibility of the treasure-hoard being hidden on the *Merida*, are at present combing the steamer from stem to stern. However, if this effort, too, proves unsuccessful, someday, somebody no doubt, will gather this wealth—if it can be located from the *Merida's* resting-place, two-hundred feet down, where it supposedly lies grotesquely dressed in a suit of green shell, buried deep in the bed of the ocean's floor seventy miles off the Virginia Capes.

The above is the only authentic information I have in my records relative to the steamer as most of the papers have long since been destroyed.

A TEMPLE named Kum Bum has a gold roof that may be worth $300,000,000.

Request:—"I intend making a trip to the Orient in the near future and before going would like to get information concerning the Tarsze Temple, especially its roof. I do not know its exact location, to be sure, but have an idea that it be located in Chinghai, China. The roof of this temple is worth approximately $300,000,000 more or less and am anxious in knowing whether the temple is governmental property or not. Are any visitors allowed in the temple?

If you are able to give me a full or partial description of above, in the next place, how do I get to the city in which this temple is located?

What is the probable cost of living for an American in that part of China?"

—MURAD NARCESSIAN, Woonsocket, R. I.

Reply by Mr. Seward Cramer:—You have asked about one of the most interesting, yet least known, religious centers of the world. But first I should like to make certain that we are speaking of the same place—there can be little doubt of this as I know of only one temple that meets your description. You refer to the Tarsze Temple and I am curious as to where you came upon this name as I have never heard it called other than Kum Bum, its Tibetan name. However you refer to Chinghai (though I prefer the more common Tsinghai spelling) which is the Chinese name for the Koko Nor district. The Koko Nor itself—it means Blue Lake—is a large body of salt water and its altitude is higher than that of any other salt water lake in the world. Kum Bum is located not far from this lake.

In outward appearance, Kum Bum is similar to other Tibetan monastaries. The main building is always much larger than any other buildings in the vicinity, two to four stories high and surmounted by the gently sloping, unornamented roof that is so different from the Chinese roof that one sees so much of. This main building houses the central shrine, the chief prayer halls, some penance rooms, the quarters of a few lamas and guest rooms. Around this building are many smaller ones containing shrines, living quarters, storage places, etc. This whole is enclosed within a high wall. Kum Bum differs

from all others in its great wealth of gold. The roof is of solid gold and your estimate of $300,000,000 is not at all out of the way. Also this is the only temple that I know of in the whole country that has a frieze under the eaves—this likewise being of gold. The main shrine is a colossal solid gold Buddha that must be worth millions more. Though one knows nothing of gold mines in this section, the metal is plentiful. In fact, the officials make all their purchases with gold dust!

To the people of this section, Kum Bum isn't famous because of its gold but rather because of a famous old tree that grows there. To an ordinary person this tree is just a tree but the natives worship it because, to the initiated, each leaf bears the writing of the prayer "Om mani padme om."

In this section, there is practically no difference between Church and State so I can answer your question by saying that the Kum Bum is government property but there is no lay official to demand passports and do the thousand things that are usually connected with a government. Visitors are allowed in the Temple but Tibet does not give welcome to a foreigner and it would be advisable for you to get the permission of the Living Buddha before setting out on such a trip.

You must remember that this is a desolate country and it is surrounded by bandit-infested areas. Dr. Sven Hedin was recently reported captured in this section and he is loved and respected by these people. It may seem queer to speak of bandits near a temple with such wealth openly displayed, but most Tibetan and Mongolian families have at least one member acting as a lama so these people would not rob themselves.

How to get there? Any way you choose will be very tough going. Great mountain barriers hinder you from going by India. From China you could go up the Yangtze River and through Szechuan or from Lanchow in Kansu Province but here again you have high mountains to cross and the country itself (particularly Kansu) is not very peaceful. The best way is by Urumchi and to reach here you must either cross the Gobi Desert or take the Trans-Siberian to Novo-Sibirsk, the Turk-Sib to Semipalatinsk and then a car for about 800 miles over so-called roads to Urumchi, where you again start out over a desert by camel train.

It is impossible to estimate the cost for this trip as it depends largely upon how much food you felt should be taken, your luggage and your suite of servants and interpreters. The rent of each camel is about five dollars a day and it would take about four months for the round trip from Urumchi. You would have to live mostly on native foods. In Sinkiang there are a number of Moslems and their food would serve as a break-in for the Tibetan fare to come. I would say that this part of your trip should cost between five and ten thousand dollars.

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A Novelette by Robert Carse

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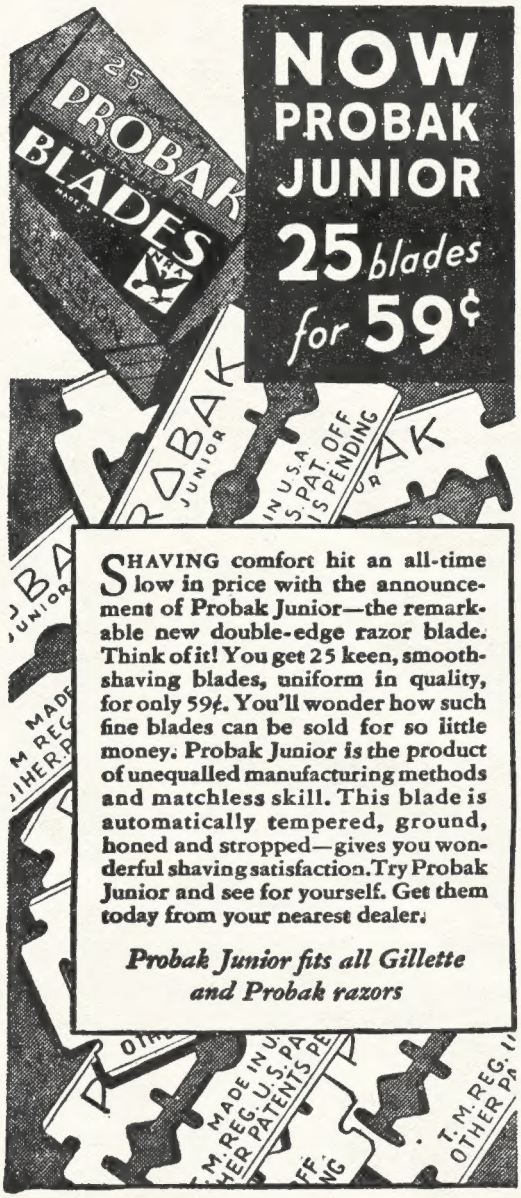
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MRS. CHARLES DALY, housewife, says: "Camels pick up my energy ... and have a delicate flavor that a woman likes."

REX BEACH, famous sportsman, says: "When I've landed a big game fish I light a Camel, and feel as good as new."

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Camel's costlier Tobaccos never get on your Nerves